

The Spectacles and Other

Jean de La Fontaine

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THE SPECTACLES

I LATELY vowed to leave the nuns alone,
So oft their freaks have in my page been shown.
The subject may at length fatigue the mind;
My Muse the veil howe'er is still inclined,
Conspicuously to hold to publick view,
And, 'mong the sisters, scene and scene pursue.
Is this too much? the nicest tricks they play;
Through soft amours oft artfully they stray,
And these in full I'd readily detail,
If I were sure the subject would not fail;
And that's impossible I must admit,
'Twould endless be, the tales appear so fit;
There's not a clerk so expeditious found,
Who could record the stories known around.
The sisters to forget, were I to try,
Suspitions might arise that, by and by,
I should return: some case might tempt my pen;
So oft I've overrun the convent-den,
Like one who always makes, from time to time,
The conversation with his feelings chime.
But let us to an end the subject bring,
And after this, of other matters sing.

IN former times was introduced a lad
Among the nuns, and like a maiden clad;
A charming girl by all he was believed;
Fifteen his age; no doubts were then conceived;
Coletta was the name the youth had brought,
And, till he got a beard, was sister thought.

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THE period howsoe'er was well employed,
And from it Agnes profit had enjoyed;
What profit? truly better had I said,
That sister Agnes by him was misled,
And store of ills received; misfortune dire
Obliged the nun more girdle to require,
And ultimately to produce (in spite
Of ev'ry wish to guard the fact from light)
A little creature that our hist'ries say,
Was found Coletta's features to display.

GREAT scandal quickly through the convent ran:
How could this child arrive? the sisters 'gan
To laugh and ask, if in an evil hour,
The mushroom could have fallen with a show'r?
Or self-created was it not supposed?
Much rage the abbess presently disclosed;
To have her holy mansion thus disgraced!
Forthwith the culprit was in prison placed.

THE father to discover next they tried;
How could he enter, pass, escape, or hide;
The walls were high; the grate was double too;
Quite small the turning-box appeared to view,
And she who managed it was very old:
Perhaps some youthful spark has been so bold,
Cried she who was superior to the rest,
To get admitted, like a maiden dressed,
And 'mong our flock (if rightly I surmise)
A wicked wolf is lurking in disguise.
Undress, I say, I'll verify the fact;
No other way remains for me to act.

THE lad disguised was terrified to death;
Each plan was dissipated with a breath;
The more he thought of means from thence to get,
The greater were the obstacles he met.
At length NECESSITY (the parent found
Of stratagems and wiles, so much renowned,
Induced the youth . . . (I scarcely can proceed)
To tie . . . expression here I clearly need;
What word will decently express the thought?
What book has got it? where should it be sought?
You've heard, in days of yore that human kind,
With windows in their bosoms were designed,
Through which 'twas easy all within to see,
And suited those of medical degree.

BUT if these windows useful were believed;
'Twas inconvenient in the heart perceived,
And women thoroughly disliked the scheme:

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They could not find the means to hide a dream.
Dame Nature howsoe'er contrived a plan:
One lace she gave the woman, one the man,
Of equal length, and each enough no doubt,
By proper care to shut the ope throughout.
The woman much too thick her eyelets placed;
And consequently, ne'er was closely laced;
The fault was all her own: herself the cause;
The man as little merited applause,
For coarsely working, soon the hole was shut,
From which the remnant lace was left to jut;
In fact, on either side, whate'er was done,
The laces never equally would run,
And we are told, both sexes acted wrong:
The woman's was too short; the man's too long.

FROM this 'tis easy, it should seem to guess:
What by the youth was tied in this distress
The end of lace that by the men was left,
When nature ordered them to close the cleft:
With thread he fastened it so very well,
That all was flat as any nun or belle;
But thread or silk, you cannot find a string
To hold, what soon I fear will give a spring,
And get away, in spite of all you do;
Bring saints or angels such a scene to view,
As twenty nuns in similar array,
Strange creatures I should think them: merely clay,
If they should at the sight unmoved remain;
I speak of nuns, howe'er, whose charms maintain
Superior rank, and like the Graces seem,
Delightful sisters! ev'ry way supreme.

THE prioress, this secret to disclose,
Appeared with spectacles upon her nose;
And twenty nuns around a dress displayed;
That convent mantua-makers never made,
Imagine to yourself what felt the youth,
'Mid this examination of the truth.
The nice proportions and the lily charms
Soon raised within his bosom dire alarms;
Like magick operated on the string,
And from it, what was tied, soon gave a spring;
Broke loose at once, just like a mettled steed,
That, having slipt its halter, flies with speed;
Against the abbess' nose with force it flew,
And spectacles from her proboscis threw.

THOUGH she had nearly fallen on the floor,
In thus attempting secrets to explore,
No jest she thought the accident, 'twas plain,

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But would with force the discipline maintain.
A chapter instantly the lady held;
Long time upon the circumstance they dwelled.
The youthful wolf that caused the direful shock;
At length was given to the aged flock,
Who tied his hands and bound him to a tree
Face 'gainst the wood, that none his front might see;
And while the cruel troop, with rage inflamed,
Considered of rewards that vengeance framed;
While some the besoms from the kitchen brought;
And others, in the convent ars'nal sought
The various instruments the sisters used
To punish when obedience was refused;
Another double-locked, within a room.
The nuns of tender hearts and youthful bloom:
By chance, a friend to sly gallants appeared,
And soon removed, what most our hero feared:
A miller mounted on his mule came by,
A tight-built active lad with piercing eye;
One much admired by all the girls around;
Played well at kayles: a good companion found.
Aha! cried he, what's here? a nice affair;
Young man, pray tell me who has placed thee there?
The sisters, say'st thou? hast thou had thy fun,
And pleased thy fancy with a wanton nun?
Art satisfied? and was she pretty too?
In truth, to judge by what appears to view,
Thou seemest thoroughly a wily wight,
That convent belles would relish morn and night.

ALAS! replied the other with a sigh,
In vain the nuns my virtue sought to try;
'Twas my misfortune: patience heav'n bestow;
For worlds such wickedness I would not know.

THE miller laughed at what the other spoke;
Untied his hands, and ev'ry bandage broke.
Said he, thou ninny, scruples can'st thou find
To counteract, and prove to pleasure blind?
The business clearly should to me belong;
Our rector ne'er had thought such conduct wrong,
And never would have played the fool like this;
Fly, haste away, away; I'll thee dismiss,
First having nicely set me in thy place;
Like me thou wert not formed for soft embrace;
I'm stout and able: quarter ne'er will ask;
Come ALL, these nuns, I'll execute the task,
And many pranks they'll see, unless a freak
Should happen any way the string to break.
The other never asked his wishes twice,
But tied him well, and left him in a trice.

WITH shoulders broad the miller you might see;
In Adam's birth-attire against the tree,
Await the coming of the aged band,
Who soon appeared, with tapers in the hand,
In solemn guise, and whips and scourges dire:
The virgin troop (as convent laws require)
In full procession moved around the Wight;
Without allowing time to catch his sight,
Or giving notice what they meant to do:
How now! cried he: why won't you take a view?
Deceived you are; regard me well I pray;
I'm not the silly fool you had to-day,
Who woman hates, and scruples seeks to raise:
Employ but me, and soon I'll gain your praise;
I'll wonders execute; my strength appears;
And; if I fail, at once cut off my ears.
At certain pleasant play I'm clever found;
But as to whips I never was renowned.

WHAT means the fellow? cried a toothless nun;
What would he tell us? Hast thou nothing done?
How! Art thou not our brat-begetter? speak;
So much the worse: on thee our rage we'll wreak,
For him that's gone we'll make thee suffer now;
Once arms in hand, we never will allow
Such characters full punishment to miss;
The play that we desire is THIS and THIS;
Then whips and scourges round him 'gan to move,
And not a little troublesome to prove
The miller, writhing with the poignant smart,
Cried loudly: I'll exert my utmost art,
Good ladies, to perform what is your due;
The more he bawled, the faster lashes flew.
This work so well the aged troop achieved,
He long remembered what his skin received.

WHILE thus the master chastisement had got;
His mule was feeding on the verdant spot.
But what became of this or that, at last,
I've never heard, and care not how it past.
'Tis quite enough to save the young gallant,
And more particulars we do not want.

My readers, for a time, could they obtain
A dozen nuns like these, where beauties reign,
Would doubtless not be seen without their dress!
We do not always ev'ry wish express.

THE BUCKING-TUB

IF once in love, you'll soon invention find
And not to cunning tricks and freaks be blind;
The youngest 'prentice, when he feels the dart,
Grows wondrous shrewd, and studies wily art.
This passion never, we perceive, remains
In want from paucity of scheming brains.
The god of hearts so well exerts his force,
That he receives his dues as things of course.
A bucking-tub, of which a tale is told,
Will prove the case, and this I'll now unfold;
Particulars I heard some days ago,
From one who seemed each circumstance to know.

WITHIN a country town, no matter where,
Its appellation nothing would declare,
A cooper and his wife, whose name was Nan,
Kept house, and through some difficulties ran.
Though scanty were their means, LOVE thither flew;
And with him brought a friend to take a view;
'Twas Cuckoldom accompanied the boy,
Two gods most intimate, who like to toy,
And, never ceremonious, seek to please
Go where they will, still equally at ease;
'Tis all for them good lodging, fare, or bed;
And, hut or palace, pleasantly they tread.

IT happened then, a spark this fair caressed,
And, when he hoped most fully to be blessed,
When all was ready to complete the scene,
And on a point: if naught should intervene
Not NAMED howe'er will quite enough suffice,
When suddenly the husband, by surprise,
Returned from drinking at an ale-house near,
just when, just when: the rest is pretty clear.

THEY curst his coming; trouble o'er them spread;
Naught could be done but hide the lover's head;
Beneath a bucking-tub, in utmost haste,
Within the court, our gay gallant was placed.

THE husband, as he entered, loudly cried,
I've sold our bucking-tub. The wife replied,

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What price, I pray? Three crowns rejoined the man;
Then thou'rt a silly ass, said mistress Nan;
To-day, by my address, I've gained a crown,
And sold the same for twenty shillings down:
My bargain luckily the first was made;
The buyer, (who of flaws is much afraid)
Examines now if ev'ry part is tight;
He's in the tub to see if all be right.
What, blockhead, would'st thou do without thy wife?
Thou huntest taverns while she works for life;
But necessary 'tis for her to act,
When thou art out, or naught would be exact.
No pleasure ever yet received have I;
But take my word, to get it now I'll try.
Gallants are plenty; husbands should have wives;
That, like themselves, lead gay or sober lives.

I PRYTHEE softly, wife, the husband said;
Come, come, sir, leave the tub, there's naught to dread;
When you are out, I'll ev'ry quarter scrape,
Then try if water from it can escape;
I'll warrant it to be as good as nice,
And nothing can be better worth the price.

OUT came the lover; in the husband went;
Scraped here and there, and tried if any vent;
With candle in his hand looked round and round,
Not dreaming once that LOVE without was found.
But nothing he could see of what was done;
And while the cooper sought to overrun
The various parts, and by the tub was hid,
The gods already noticed thither slid;
A job was by the deities proposed,
That highly pleased the couple when disclosed;
A very diff'rent work from what within
The husband had, who scraped with horrid din,
And rubbed, and scrubbed, and beat so very well,
Fresh courage took our gay gallant and belle;
They now resumed the thread so sadly lost,
When, by the cooper's coming, all was crossed.

THE reader won't require to know the rest;
What passed perhaps may easily be guessed.
'Tis quite enough, my thesis I have proved;
The artful trick our pair with raptures moved.
Nor one nor t'other was a 'prentice new;
A lover be: and wiles you'll soon pursue.

THE IMPOSSIBLE THING

A DEMON, blacker in his skin than heart,
So great a charm was prompted to impart;
To one in love, that he the lady gained,
And full possession in the end obtained:
The bargain was, the lover should enjoy
The belle he wished, and who had proved so coy.
Said Satan, soon I'll make her lend an ear,
In ev'ry thing more complaisant appear;
But then, instead of what thou might'st expect,
To be obedient and let me direct,
The devil, having thus obliged a friend,
He'll thy commands obey, thou may'st depend,
The very moment; and within the hour
Thy humble servant, who has got such pow'r,
Will ask for others, which at once thou'lt find;
Make no delay, for if thou art so blind,
Thou comprehend'st, thy body and thy soul
The lovely fair no longer shall control,
But Satan then upon them both shall seize,
And with them do—whatever he may please:
'Gainst this the spark had not a word to say;
'Twas pleasing to command, though not obey.

HE sallied forth the beauteous belle to seek,
And found her as he wished: complying—meek;
Indulged in blisses, and most happy proved,
Save that the devil always round him moved.
Whatever rose within the whirl of thought
He now commanded: quickly it was brought;
And when he ordered palaces to rise,
Or raging tempests to pervade the skies,
The devil instantly obeyed his will,
And what he asked was done with wondrous skill.

LARGE sums his purse received; the devil went
just where commanded, and to Rome was sent,
From whence his highness store of pardons got;
No journey long, though distant was the spot,
But ev'ry thing with magick ease arose,
And all was soon accomplished that he chose.
So oft the spark was asked for orders new,
Which he was bound to give the fiend at view,
That soon his head most thoroughly was drained,

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And to the fair our lover much complained,
Declared the truth, and ev'ry thing detailed,
How he was lost, if in commands he failed.

IS'T this, said she, that makes thee so forlorn?
Mere nothing!—quickly I'll remove the thorn;
When Satan comes, present his highness this,
Which I have here, and say: You will not miss
To make it flat, and not its curl retain
On which she gave him, what with little pain
She drew from covert of the Cyprian grove,
The fairy labyrinth where pleasures rove,
Which formerly a duke so precious thought;
To raise a knightly order thence he sought,
Illustrious institution, noble plan,
More filled with gods and demi-gods than man.

THE lover to the crafty devil said:—
'Tis crooked this, you see, and I am led
To wish it otherwise; go, make it straight;
A perfect line: no turn, nor twist, nor plait.
Away to work, be quick, fly, hasten, run;
The demon fancied it could soon be done;
No time he lost, but set it in the press,
And tried to manage it with great success;
The massy hammer, kept beneath the deep,
Made no impression: he as well might sleep;
Howe'er he beat: whatever charm he used:
'Twas still the same; obedience it refused.
His time and labour constantly were lost;
Vain proved each effort: mystick skill was crossed;
The wind, or rain, or fog, or frost, or snow,
Had no effect: still circular 'twould go.
The more he tried, the ringlet less inclined
To drop the curvature so closely twined.
How's this? said Satan, never have I seen
Such stubborn stuff wherever I have been;
The shades below no demon can produce,
That could divine what here would prove of use:
'Twould puzzle hell to break the curling spring,
And make a line direct of such a thing.

ONE morn the devil to the other went:
Said he, to give thee up I'll be content;
If solely thou wilt openly declare
What 'tis I hold, for truly I despair;
I'm victus I confess, and can't succeed:
No doubt the thing's impossible decreed.

FRIEND Satan, said the lover, you are wrong;

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Despondency should not to you belong,
At least so soon: what you desire to know
Is not the only one that's found to grow;
Still many more companions it has got,
And others could be taken from the spot.