

The Picture and Other

Jean de La Fontaine

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THE PICTURE

SOLICITED I've been to give a tale,
In which (though true, decorum must prevail),
The subject from a picture shall arise,
That by a curtain's kept from vulgar eyes.
My brain must furnish various features new:
What's delicate and smart produce to view;
By this expressed, and not by t'other said:
And all so clear, most easy to be read,
By ev'ry fool, without the aid of notes,
That idiot's bad indeed who never quotes.

CATULLUS tells us, ev'ry matron sage
Will peep most willingly (whate'er her age),
At that gigantick gift, which Juno made,
To Venus' fruit, in gardens oft displayed.
If any belle recede, and shun the sight,
Dissimulation she supposes right.

THIS principle allowed, why scruples make?
Why, less than eyes, should ears a license take?
But since 'tis so resolved I'll do my best,
And naught in open terms shall be expressed:
A veil shall over ev'ry charm be cast,
Of gauze indeed, and this from first to last,
So nicely done, that howsoever tost,
To none I trust will any thing be lost.
Who nicely thinks, and speaks with graceful ease;
Can current make just whatsoever he please;
For all will pass, as I have often known:
The word well chosen, pardon soon is shown,

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The sex o'erlook the thing no more the same,
The thought remains, but 'tis without a name;
No blush is raised; no difficulty found;
Yet ev'ry body understands around.

AT present, much I need this useful art:
Why? you will ask; because, when I impart
Such wondrous circumstances, ev'ry belle,
Without reserve, will con them over well.
To this I answer: female ears are chaste,
Though roguish are their eyes, as well as taste.

BE that as 'twill, I certainly should like,
With freedom to explain, by terms oblique,
To belles, how this was broken: that was down:
Assist me pray, ye NINE of high renown;
But you are maids, and strangers, we agree,
To LOVE'S soft scenes, not knowing A from B.
Remain then, Muses, never stir an inch,
But beg the god of verse, when at a pinch,
To help me out and kind assistance lend,
To choose expressions which will not offend,
Lest I some silly things should chance to say,
That might displeasure raise, and spoil my lay.
Enough, howe'er, we've on the subject said:
'Tis time we t'wards the painting should be led,
Which an adventure you will find contains,
That happened once in Cupid's famed domains.

IN former days, just by Cythera town
A monastery was, of some renown,
With nuns the queens of beauty filled the place,
And gay gallants you easily might trace.
The courtier, citizen, and parson too,
The doctor and the bachelor you'd view,
With eager steps: all visits thither made;
And 'mong the latter, one (a pleasing blade)
Had free access: was thought a prudent friend,
Who might to sisters many comforts lend;
Was always closely shaved and nicely dressed;
And ev'ry thing he said was well expressed;
The breath of scandal, howsoever pat,
Ne'er lighted on his neat cravat nor hat.

TWO nuns alternatively, from the youth;
Experienced many services, in truth;
The one had recently a novice been;
Few months had passed since she complete was seen;
The other still the dress of novice wore;
The youngest's age was seventeen years, not more
Time doubtless very proper (to be plain)

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Love's wily thesis fully to sustain:
The bachelor so well the fair had taught,
And they so earnestly the science sought,
That by experience both the art had learned,
And ev'ry thing most perfectly discerned.

THESE sisters eagerly had made one day
An assignation with the lover gay;
To have the entertainment quite complete,
They'd Bacchus, Ceres too, who Venus greet:
With perfect neatness all the meats were served,
And naught from grace and elegancy swerved;
The wines, the custards, jellies, creams, and ice:
The decorations, ev'ry thing was nice;
What pleasing objects and delights were viewed!
The room with sweetest flow'rs fair Flora strewed;
A sort of garden o'er the linen traced
Here lakes of love: there names entwined were placed;
Magnificence like this the nuns admired,
And such amusements ardently desired.
Their beauty too incited to be free;
A thousand matters filled their souls with glee;
In height the belles were pretty much the same
Like alabaster fair; of perfect frame;
In num'rous corners Cupid nestling lay:
Beneath a stomacher he'd slyly play,
A veil or scapulary, this or that,
Where least the eye of day perceived he sat,
Unless a lover called to mystick bow'rs,
Where he might hearts entwine with chains of flow'rs;
A thousand times a day the urchin flew,
With open arms the sisters to pursue;
Their charms were such in ev'ry air and look,
Both (one by one) he for his mother took.

WITH anxious looks, the ladies thus prepared,
Expected him who all their kindness shared;
Now they bestowed abuse; next fondly praised:
Then of his conduct dark suspicions raised,
Conceived, a new amour him kept away:
What can it be, said one, that makes him stay?
Of honour an affair. love sickness what?
Said t'other whether it be this or that,
If here again his face he ever show,
A pretty trick in turn we'll let him know.

WHILE thus the couple sought their plot to frame,
A convent porter with a burden came,
For her who kept the stores of ev'ry kind,
Depositary of the whole designed.
'Twas merely a pretence, as I am told:

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The things were not required for young or old;
But she much appetite had got in truth,
Which made her have recourse to such a youth,
Who was regarded, in repasts like these,
A first rate cook that all prepared at ease.

THIS awkward, heavy lout mistook the cell;
By chance upon our ladies' room he fell,
And knocked with weighty hands: they ope'd the door.
And gave abuse, but soon their anger o'er,
The nuns conceived a treasure they had found,
And, laughing heartily, no longer frowned,
But both exclaimed at once: let's take this fool;
Of him we easily can make a tool;
As well as t'other, don't you think he'll do?
The eldest added: let's our whim pursue;
'Tis well determined; What were we to get,
That here we waited, and are waiting yet?
Fine words and phrases; nothing of the kind;
This wight 's as good, for what we have a mind,
As any bachelor or doctor wise
At all events, for present, he'll suffice.

SHE rightly judged; his height, form, simple air,
And ev'ry act, so clearly void of care,
Raised expectation; this was AESop's man,
He never thought: 'twas all without a plan;
Both ate and drank, and, had he been at will,
Would matters far have pushed, though void of skill.

FAMILIAR grown, the fellow ready seemed,
To execute whate'er was proper deemed;
To serve the convent he was porter made,
And in their wishes nuns of course obeyed.

'TIS here begins the subject we've in view,
The scene that faithfully our painter drew;
Apollo, give me aid, assistance lend,
Enable me, I pray, to comprehend,
Why this mean stupid rustick sat at ease,
And left the sisters (Claudia, formed to please,
And lovely fair Theresa) all the care?
Had he not better done to give a chair?

I THINK I hear the god of verse reply:
Not quite so fast my friend, you may rely,
These matters never can the probe endure;
I understand you; Cupid, to be sure,
Is doubtless found a very roguish boy,
Who, though he please at times, will oft annoy;
I'm wrong a wicked whelp like this to take,

And, master of the ceremonies make.

NO sooner in a house the urchin gets,
But rules and laws he at defiance sets;
The place of reason whim at once assumes,
Breaks ev'ry obstacle, frets, rages, fumes.
With scenes like these will Cupid oft surprise,
And frantick passion sparkle in his eyes.

SOON on the floor was seen this boorish wight;
For, whether that the chair was rather slight,
Or that the composition of the clown
Was not, like that of geese, of softest down,
Or that Theresa, by her gay discourse,
Had penetrated to the mystick source,
The am'rous pulpit suddenly gave way,
And on the ground the rustick quickly lay.
The first attempt had clearly bad success,
And fair Theresa suffered you may guess.

YE censors keep from hence your eyes prophane;
See, honest hearts, how Claudia tried amain,
To take advantage of the dire mishap,
And all she could, with eagerness entrap;
For in the fall Theresa lost her hold;
The other pushed her: further off she rolled;
And then, what she had quitted Claudia seized;
Theresa, like a demon quite displeas'd,
Endeavour'd to recover what she'd lost:
Again to take her seat, but she was cross'd.
The sister in possession ne'er inclin'd
To cede a post so pleasant to her mind;
Theresa raised her hand to give a stroke;
And what of that? if any thing provoke
When thus engag'd, unheeded it remains
Small ills are soon forgot where pleasure reigns.

IN spite of rage apparent in the face;
Of her who in the scuffle lost her place,
The other followed up the road she took;
His course the rustick also ne'er forsook.
Theresa scolded; anger marked her eyes;
In Venus' games contentions oft arise;
Their violence no parallel has seen:
In proof, remember Menelaus' queen.
Though here to take a part Bellona 's found,
Of cuirasses I see but few around;
When Venus closes with the god of Thrace,
Her armour then appears with ev'ry grace.
The FAIR will understand: enough is said;
When beauty's goddess is to combat led,

The Picture and Other

Her body—cuirass shows superior charms;
The Cyclops rarely forge such pleasing arms.
Had Vulcan graven on Achilles' shield
The picture we've described, more praise 'twould yield.

THE nun's adventure I in verse have told,
But not in colours, like the action, bold;
And as the story in the picture fails,
The latter seems to lose in my details.
The pen and brush express not quite the same;
Eyes are not ears, however we may aim.

ENTANGLED in the net, I long have left
The fair Theresa, of her throne bereft;
Howe'er, this sister had her turn we find,
So much to please, the porter was inclined,
That both were satisfied, and felt content;
Here ends our tale, and truly I lament,
That not a word about the feast is said,
Though I've no doubt, they freely drank and fed;
And this for reasons easily conceived:
The interlude gave rest that much relieved.
In fine, 'twas well throughout, except, in truth,
The hour of meeting settled with the youth,
Which much embarrasses I will avow,
For if he never came and made his bow,
The sisters had the means, when they might please,
Completely to console themselves at ease;
And if the spark appeared, the belles could hide
Both clown and chair, or any thing beside
The lover what he wanted soon possessed,
And was as usual treated with the best.

THE PACK—SADDLE

A FAMOUS painter, jealous of his wife;
Whose charms he valued more than fame or life,
When going on a journey used his art,
To paint an ASS upon a certain part,
(Umbilical, 'tis said) and like a seal:
Impressive token, nothing thence to steal.

The Picture and Other

A BROTHER brush, enamoured of the dame;
Now took advantage, and declared his flame:
The Ass effaced, but God knows how 'twas done;
Another soon howe'er he had begun,
And finished well, upon the very spot;
In painting, few more praises ever got;
But want of recollection made him place
A saddle, where before he none could trace.

THE husband, when returned, desired to look
At what he drew, when leave he lately took.
Yes, see my dear, the wily wife replied,
The Ass is witness, faithful I abide.
Zounds! said the painter, when he got a sight,
What! you'd persuade me ev'ry thing is right?
I wish the witness you display so well,
And him who saddled it, were both in Hell.

THE EAR-MAKER AND THE MOULD-MENDER

WHEN William went from home (a trader styled):
Six months his better half he left with child,
A simple, comely, modest, youthful dame,
Whose name was Alice; from Champaign she came.
Her neighbour Andrew visits now would pay;
With what intention, needless 'tis to say:
A master who but rarely spread his net,
But, first or last, with full success he met;
And cunning was the bird that 'scaped his snare;
Without surrendering a feather there.

QUITE raw was Alice; for his purpose fit;
Not overburdened with a store of wit;
Of this indeed she could not be accused,
And Cupid's wiles by her were never used;
Poor lady, all with her was honest part,
And naught she knew of stratagem or art.

HER husband then away, and she alone,
This neighbour came, and in a whining tone,
To her observed, when compliments were o'er:
I'm all astonishment, and you deplore,
To find that neighbour William's gone from hence,
And left your child's completing in suspense,

The Picture and Other

Which now you bear within, and much I fear,
That when 'tis born you'll find it wants an ear.
Your looks sufficiently the fact proclaim,
For many instances I've known the same.
Good heav'ns! replied the lady in a fright;
What say you, pray? the infant won't be right!
Shall I be mother to a one-eared child?
And know you no relief that's certain styled?
Oh yes, there is, rejoined the crafty knave,
From such mishap I can the baby save;
Yet solemnly I vow, for none but you
I'd undertake the toilsome job to do.
The ills of others, if I may be plain,
Except your husband's, never give me pain;
But him I'd serve for ever, while I've breath;
To do him good I'd e'en encounter death.
Now let us see, without more talk or fears,
If I know how to forge the bantling ears.
Remember, cried the wife, to make them like.
Leave that to me, said he, I'll justly strike.
Then he prepared for work; the dame gave way;
Not difficult she proved: well pleased she lay;
Philosophy was never less required,
And Andrew's process much the fair admired,
Who, to his work extreme attention paid;
'Twas now a tendon; then a fold he made,
Or cartilage, of which he formed enough,
And all without complaining of the stuff.
To-morrow we will polish it, said he:
Then in perfection soon the whole will be;
And from repeating this so oft, you'll get
As perfect issue as was ever met.
I'm much obliged to you, the wife replied,
A friend is good in whom we may confide.

NEXT day, when tardy Time had marked the hour;
That Andrew hoped again to use his pow'r,
He was not plunged in sleep, but briskly flew,
His purpose with the charmer to pursue.
Said he, all other things aside I've laid,
This ear to finish, and to lend you aid.
And I, the dame replied, was on the eve,
To send and beg you not the job to leave;
Above stairs let us go: away they ran,
And quickly recommenced as they began.
The work so oft was smoothed, that Alice showed
Some scruples lest the ear he had bestowed
Should do too much, and to the wily wight,
She said, so little you the labour slight,
'Twere well if ears no more than two appear;
Of that, rejoined the other, never fear;

The Picture and Other

I've guarded thoroughly against defects,
Mistake like that shall ne'er your senses vex.

THE ear howe'er was still in hand the same,
When from his journey home the husband came.
Saluted Alice, who with anxious look,
Exclaimed, your work how finely you forsook,
And, but for neighbour Andrew's kindness here,
Our child would incomplete have been an ear,
I could not let a thing remain like this,
And Andrew would not be to friends remiss,
But, worthy man, he left his thriving trade,
And for the babe a proper ear has made.

THE husband, not conceiving how his wife,
Could be so weak and ignorant of life,
The circumstances made her fully tell,
Repeat them o'er and on each action dwell.
Enraged at length, a pistol by the bed
He seized and swore at once he'd shoot her dead.
The belle with tears replied, howe'er she'd swerved,
Such cruel treatment never she deserved.
Her innocence, and simple, gentle way,
At length appeared his frantick rage to lay.
What injury, continued she, is done?
The strictest scrutiny I would not shun;
Your goods and money, ev'ry thing is right;
And Andrew told me, nothing he would slight;
That you would find much more than you could want;
And this I hope to me you'll freely grant;
If falsehood I advance, my life I'll lose;
Your equity, I trust, will me excuse.

A LITTLE cooled, then William thus replied,
We'll say no more; you have been drawn aside;
What passed you fancied acting for the best,
And I'll consent to put the thing at rest;
To nothing good such altercations tend;
I've but a word: to that attention lend;
Contrive to-morrow that I here entrap
This fellow who has caused your sad mishap;
You'll utter not a word of what I've said;
Be secret or at once I'll strike you dead.
Adroitly you must act: for instance say;
I'm on a second journey gone away;
A message or a letter to him send,
Soliciting that he'll on you attend,
That something you have got to let him know;
To come, no doubt, the rascal won't be slow;
Amuse him then with converse most absurd,
But of the EAR remember, not a word;

THE EAR-MAKER AND THE MOULD-MENDER

The Picture and Other

That's finished now, and nothing can require;
You'll carefully perform what I desire.
Poor innocent! the point she nicely hit;
Fear oft gives simpletons a sort of wit.

THE arch gallant arrived; the husband came
Ascended to the room where sat his dame;
Much noise he made, his coming to announce;
The lover, terrified, began to bounce;
Now here, now there, no shelter could he meet;
Between the bed and wall he put his feet,
And lay concealed, while William loudly knocked;
Fair Alice readily the door unlocked,
And, pointing with her hand, informed the spouse,
Where he might easily his rival rouse.

THE husband ev'ry way was armed so well,
He four such men as Andrew could repel;
In quest of succour howsoe'er he went:
To kill him surely William never meant,
But only take an ear, or what the Turks,
Those savage beasts, cut off from Nature's works;
Which doubtless must be infinitely worse
Infernal practice and continual curse.
'Twas this he whispered should be Andrew's doom,
When with his easy wife he left the room;
She nothing durst reply: the door he shut,
And our gallant 'gan presently to strut,
Around and round, believing all was right,
And William unacquainted with his plight.

THE latter having well the project weighed,
Now changed his plan, and other schemes surveyed;
Proposed within himself revenge to take,
With less parade: less noise it then would make,
And better fruit the action would produce,
Than if he were apparently profuse.
Said he to Alice, go and seek his wife;
To her relate the whole that caused our strife;
Minutely all from first to last detail;
And then the better on her to prevail,
To hasten here, you'll hint that you have fears,
That Andrew risks the loss of more than ears,
For I have punishment severe in view,
Which greatly she must wish I should not do;
But if an ear-maker, like this, is caught,
The worst of chastisement is always sought;
Such horrid things as scarcely can be said:
They make the hair to stand upon the head;
That he's upon the point of suff'ring straight,
And only for her presence things await;

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That though she cannot all proceedings stay,
Perhaps she may some portion take away.
Go, bring her instantly, haste quickly, run;
And, if she comes, I'll pardon what's been done.

WITH joy to Andrew's house fair Alice went;
The wife to follow her appeared content;
Quite out of breath, alone she ran up stairs,
And, not perceiving him who shared her cares;
Believed he was imprisoned in a room;
And while with fear she trembled for his doom;
The master (having laid aside his arms)
Now came to compliment the lady's charms;
He gave the belle a chair, who looked most nice:
Said he, ingratitude's the worst of vice;
To me your husband has been wondrous kind;
So many services has done I find,
That, ere you leave this house, I'd wish to make
A little return, and this you will partake.
When I was absent from my loving dear,
Obligingly he made her babe an ear.
The compliment of course I must admire;
Retaliation is what I desire,
And I've a thought: your children all have got
The nose a little short, which is a blot;
A fault within the mould no doubt's the cause,
Which I can mend, and any other flaws.
The business now let's execute I pray,
On which the dame he took without delay,
And placed her near where Andrew hid his head,
Then 'gan to operate as he was led.

THE, lady patiently his process bore,
And blessed her stars that Andrew's risk was o'er
That she had thus the dire return received,
And saved the man for whom her bosom grieved.
So much emotion William seemed to feel,
No grace he gave, but all performed with zeal;
Retaliated ev'ry way so well,
He measure gave for measure: ell for ell.
How true the adage, that revenge is sweet!
The plan he followed clearly was discrete;
For since he wished his honour to repair:
Of any better way I'm not aware.

THE whole without a murmur Andrew viewed,
And thanked kind Heav'n that nothing worse ensued;
One ear most readily he would have lost,
Could he be certain that would pay the cost.
He thought 'twould lucky be, could he get out,
For all considered, better 'twere no doubt,

The Picture and Other

Howe'er ridiculous the thing appears,
To have a pair of horns than lose his ears.