

The Nightingale and Other

Jean de La Fontaine

Table of Contents

<u>The Nightingale and Other</u>	1
<u>Jean de La Fontaine</u>	1
<u>THE DRESS-MAKER</u>	1
<u>THE GASCON</u>	2
<u>THE PITCHER</u>	2
<u>TO PROMISE IS ONE THING TO KEEP IT, ANOTHER</u>	3
<u>THE NIGHTINGALE</u>	4

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- THE DRESS-MAKER
- THE GASCON
- THE PITCHER
- TO PROMISE IS ONE THING TO KEEP IT, ANOTHER
- THE NIGHTINGALE
- EPITAPH OF LA FONTAINE MADE BY HIMSELF

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THE DRESS-MAKER

A CLOISTERED nun had a lover
Dwelling in the neighb'ring town;
Both racked their brains to discover
How they best their love might crown.
The swain to pass the convent-door!
No easy matter! Thus they swore,
And wished it light. I ne'er knew a nun
In such a pass to be outdone:
In woman's clothes the youth must dress,
And gain admission. I confess
The ruse has oft been tried before,
But it succeeded as of yore.
Together in a close barred cell
The lovers were, and sewed all day,
Nor heeded how time flew away.
"What's that I hear? Refection bell!
"'Tis time to part. Adieu! Farewell!
"How's this?" exclaimed the abbess, "why
"The last at table?" "Madam, I
"Have had my dress-maker." "The rent
"On which you've both been so intent
"Is hard to stop, for the whole day
"To sew and mend, you made her stay;
"Much work indeed you've had to do!
" Madam, 't would last the whole night through,
"When in our task we find enjoyment
"There is no end of the employment."

THE GASCON

I AM always inclined to suspect
The best story under the sun
As soon as by chance I detect
That teller and hero are one.

We're all of us prone to conceit,
And like to proclaim our own glory,
But our purpose we're apt to defeat
As actors in chief of our story.

To prove the truth of what I state
Let me an anecdote relate:
A Gascon with his comrade sat
At tavern drinking. This and that
He vaunted with assertion pat.
From gasconade to gasconade
Passed to the conquests he had made
In love. A buxom country maid,
Who served the wine, with due attention
Lent patient ear to each invention,
And pressed her hands against her side
Her bursting merriment to hide.
To hear our Gascon talk, no Sue
Nor Poll in town but that he knew;
With each he'd passed a blissful night
More to their own than his delight.
This one he loved for she was fair,
That for her glossy ebon hair.
One miss, to tame his cruel rigour,
Had brought him gifts. She owned his vigour
In short it wanted but his gaze
To set each trembling heart ablaze.
His strength surpassed his luck, the test
In one short night ten times he'd blessed
A dame who gratefully expressed
Her thanks with corresponding zest.
At this the maid burst forth, "What more?
"I never heard such lies before!
"Content were I if at that sport
"I had what that poor dame was short."

THE PITCHER

THE simple Jane was sent to bring
Fresh water from the neighb'ring spring;
The matter pressed, no time to waste,
Jane took her jug, and ran in haste
The well to reach, but in her flurry

The Nightingale and Other

(The more the speed the worse the hurry),
Tripped on a rolling stone, and broke
Her precious pitcher, ah! no joke!
Nay, grave mishap! 'twere better far
To break her neck than such a jar!
Her dame would beat and soundly rate her,
No way could Jane propitiate her.
Without a sou new jug to buy!
"Twere better far for her to die!
O'erwhelmed by grief and cruel fears
Unhappy Jane burst into tears
"I can't go home without the delf,"
Sobbed Jane, "I'd rather kill myself;
"So here am I resolved to die."
A friendly neighbour passing by
O'erheard our damsel's lamentation;
And kindly offered consolation:
"If death, sweet maiden, be thy bent,
"I'll aid thee in thy sad intent."
Throwing her down, he drew his dirk,
And plunged it in the maid, a work
You'll say was cruel, not so Jane,
Who even seemed to like the pain,
And hoped to be thus stabbed again.
Amid the weary world's alarms,
For some e'en death will have its charms;
"If this, my friend, is how you kill,
"Of breaking jugs I'll have my fill!"

TO PROMISE IS ONE THING TO KEEP IT, ANOTHER

JOHN courts Perrette; but all in vain;
Love's sweetest oaths, and tears, and sighs
All potent spells her heart to gain
The ardent lover vainly tries:
Fruitless his arts to make her waver,
She will not grant the smallest favour:
A ruse our youth resolved to try
The cruel air to mollify:
Holding his fingers ten outspread
To Perrette's gaze, and with no dread
"So often," said he, "can I prove,
"My sweet Perrette, how warm my love."
When lover's last avowals fail
To melt the maiden's coy suspicions
A lover's sign will oft prevail
To win the way to soft concessions:
Half won she takes the tempting bait;
Smiles on him, draws her lover nearer,
With heart no longer obdurate

The Nightingale and Other

She teaches him no more to fear her—
A pinch, a kiss, a kindling eye,
Her melting glances, nothing said.
John ceases not his suit to ply
Till his first finger's debt is paid.
A second, third and fourth he gains,
Takes breath, and e'en a fifth maintains.
But who could long such contest wage?
Not I, although of fitting age,
Nor John himself, for here he stopped,
And further effort sudden dropped.
Perrette, whose appetite increased
just as her lover's vigour ceased,
In her fond reckoning defeated,
Considered she was greatly cheated
If duty, well discharged, such blame
Deserve; for many a highborn dame
Would be content with such deceit.
But Perrette, as already told,
Out of her count, began to scold
And call poor John an arrant cheat
For promising and not performing.
John calmly listened to her storming,
And well content with work well done,
Thinking his laurels fairly won,
Coolly replied, on taking leave:
"No cause I see to fume and grieve;
"Or for such trifle to dispute;
"To promise and to execute
"Are not the same, be it confessed,
"Suffice it to have done one's best;
"With time I'll yet discharge what's due;
"Meanwhile, my sweet Perrette, adieu!"

THE NIGHTINGALE

NO easy matter 'tis to hold,
Against its owner's will, the fleece
Who troubled by the itching smart
Of Cupid's irritating dart,
Eager awaits some Jason bold
To grant release.
E'en dragon huge, or flaming steer,
When Jason's loved will cause no fear.

Duennas, grating, bolt and lock,
All obstacles can naught avail;
Constraint is but a stumbling block;
For youthful ardour must prevail.
Girls are precocious nowadays,

The Nightingale and Other

Look at the men with ardent gaze,
And longings' an infinity;
Trim misses but just in their teens
By day and night devise the means
To dull with subtlety to sleep
The Argus vainly set to keep
In safety their virginity.
Sighs, smiles, false tears, they'll fain employ
An artless lover to decoy.
I'll say no more, but leave to you,
Friend reader, to pronounce if true
What I've asserted when you have heard
How artful Kitty, caged her bird.

IN a small town in Italy,
The name of which I do not know,
Young Kitty dwelt, gay, pretty, free,
Varambon's child. Boccacio
Omits her mother's name, which not
To you or me imports a jot.
At fourteen years our Kitty's charms
Were all that could be wished plump arms,
A swelling bosom; on her cheeks
Roses' and lilies' mingled streaks,
A sparkling eye all these, you know,
Speak well for what is found below.
With such advantages as these
No virgin sure could fail to please,
Or lack a lover; nor did Kate;
But little time she had to wait;
One soon appeared to seal her fate.
Young Richard saw her, loved her, wooed her
What swain I ask could have withstood her?
Soft words, caresses, tender glances,
The battery of love's advances,
Soon lit up in the maiden's breast
The flame which his own heart possessed,
Soon growing to a burning fire
Of love and mutual desire.
Desire for what? My reader knows,
Or if he does not may suppose,
And not be very wond'rous wise.
When youthful lovers mingle sighs,