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#14 in our series by Jean de La Fontaine (The Tales and Novels)

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TALES AND NOVELS OF FONTAINE, V14 ***

This eBook was produced by David Widger <widger@cecomet.net>

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file for those who may wish to sample the author's ideas before making an

entire meal of them. D.W.]

THE TALES AND NOVELS
OF
J. DE LA FONTAINE

Volume 14.

Contains:

The Countryman Who Sought His Calf
Hans Carvel's Ring
The Hermit
The Convent Gardener of Lamporechio

THE COUNTRYMAN WHO SOUGHT HIS CALF

A COUNTRYMAN, one day, his calf had lost,
And, seeking it, a neighbouring forest crossed;
The tallest tree that in the district grew,
He climbed to get a more extensive view.
Just then a lady with her lover came;
The place was pleasing, both to spark and dame;
Their mutual wishes, looks and eyes expressed,
And on the grass the lady was caressed.
At sights of charms, enchanting to the eyes,
The gay gallant exclaimed, with fond surprise:--
Ye gods, what striking beauties now I see!
No objects named; but spoke with anxious glee.
The clod, who, on the tree had mounted high,
And heard at ease the conversation nigh,
Now cried:--Good man! who see with such delight;
Pray tell me if my calf be in your sight?

HANS CARVEL'S RING

HANS CARVEL took, when weak and late in life;
A girl, with youth and beauteous charms to wife;
And with her, num'rous troubles, cares and fears;

For, scarcely one without the rest appears.
Bab (such her name, and daughter of a knight)
Was airy, buxom: formed for am'rous fight.
Hans, holding jeers and cuckoldom in dread,
Would have his precious rib with caution tread,
And nothing but the Bible e'er peruse;
All other books he daily would abuse;
Blamed secret visits; frowned at loose attire;
And censured ev'ry thing gallants admire.
The dame, howe'er, was deaf to all he said;
No preaching pleased but what to pleasure led,
Which made the aged husband hold his tongue.
And wish for death, since all round went wrong.
Some easy moments he perhaps might get;
A full detail in hist'ry's page is met.
One night, when company he'd had to dine,
And pretty well was fill'd with gen'rous wine,
Hans dreamed, as near his wife he snoring lay,
The devil came his compliments to pay,
And having on his finger put a ring,
Said he, friend Hans, I know thou feel'st a sting;
Thy trouble 's great: I pity much thy case;
Let but this ring, howe'er, thy finger grace,
And while 'tis there I'll answer with my head,
THAT ne'er shall happen which is now thy dread:
Hans, quite delighted, forced his finger through;
You drunken beast, cried Bab, what would you do?
To love's devoirs quite lost, you take no care,
And now have thrust your finger God knows where!

THE HERMIT

WHEN Venus and Hypocrisy combine,
Oft pranks are played that show a deep design;
Men are but men, and friars full as weak:
I'm not by Envy moved these truths to speak.
Have you a sister, daughter, pretty wife?
Beware the monks as you would guard your life;
If in their snares a simple belle be caught:
The trap succeeds: to ruin she is brought.
To show that monks are knaves in Virtue's mask;
Pray read my tale:--no other proof I ask.

A HERMIT, full of youth, was thought around,
A saint, and worthy of the legend found.
The holy man a knotted cincture wore;
But, 'neath his garb:--heart-rotten to the core.

A chaplet from his twisted girdle hung,
Of size extreme, and regularly strung,
On t'other side was worn a little bell;
The hypocrite in ALL, he acted well;
And if a female near his cell appeared,
He'd keep within as if the sex he feared,
With downcast eyes and looks of woe complete,
You'd ne'er suppose that butter he could eat.

NOT far from where the hermit's cell was placed,
Within a village dwelled a widow chaste;
Her residence was at the further end
And all her store--a daughter as a friend,
Who candour, youth, and charms supreme possessed;
And still a virgin lived, howe'er distressed.
Though if the real truth perhaps we name,
'Twas more simplicity than virtuous aim;
Not much of industry, but honest heart;
No wealth, nor lovers, who might hope impart.
In Adam's days, when all with clothes were born,
She doubtless might like finery have worn;
A house was furnished then without expense;
For sheets or mattresses you'd no pretence;
Not e'en a bed was necessary thought
No blankets, pillowbiers, nor quilts were bought.
Those times are o'er; then Hymen came alone;
But now a lawyer in his train is shown.

OUR anchorite, in begging through the place;
This girl beheld,--but not with eyes of grace.
Said he, she'll do, and, if thou manag'st right,
Lucius, at times, with her to pass the night.
No time he lost, his wishes to secure:
The means, we may suppose, not over pure.

QUITE near the open fields they lived, I've said;
An humble, boarded cottage o'er their head.
One charming night--no, I mistake 'tis plain,
Our hermit, favoured much by wind and rain,
Pierced in the boarding, where by time 'twas worn;
A hole through which he introduced a horn;
And loudly bawled:--attend to what I say,
Ye women, my commands at once obey.
This voice spread terror through the little cot;
Both hid their heads and trembled for their lot;
But still our monk his horn would sound aloud
Awake! cried he; your favour God has vowed;
My faithful servant, Lucius, haste to seek;
At early dawn go find this hermit meek
To no one say a word: 'tis Heav'n ordains;
Fear nothing, Lucius ever blessed remains;
I'll show the way myself: your daughter place,
Good widow, with this holy man of grace;

And from their intercourse a pope shall spring,
Who back to virtue christendom will bring.

HE spoke to them so very loud and clear,
They heard, though 'neath the clothes half dead with fear.
Some time howe'er the females lay in dread;
At length the daughter ventured out her head,
And, pulling hastily her parent's arm,
Said she, dear mother, (not suspecting harm)
Good Heav'ns! must I obey and thither go?
What would the holy man on me bestow?
I know not what to say nor how to act;
Now cousin Anne would with him be exact,
And better recollect his sage advice:--
Fool! said the mother, never be so nice;
Go, nothing fear, and do whate'er's desired;
Much understanding will not be required;
The first or second time thou'lt get thy cue,
And cousin Anne will less know what to do.
Indeed? the girl replied; well, let's away,
And we'll return to bed without delay.
But softly, cried the mother with a smile;
Not quite so fast, for Satan may beguile;
And if 'twere so, hast taken proper care?
I think he spoke like one who would ensnare.
To be precipitate, in such a case,
Perhaps might lead at once to dire disgrace.
If thou wert terrified and did'st not hear,
Myself I'm sure was quite o'ercome with fear.
No, no, rejoined the daughter, I am right:
I clearly heard, dear mother, spite of fright.
Well then, replied the widow, let us pray,
That we by Satan be not led astray.

AT length they both arose when morning came,
And through the day the converse was the same.
At night howe'er the horn was heard once more,
And terrified the females as before.
Thou unbelieving woman, cried the voice,
For certain purposes of God the choice;
No more delay, but to the hermit fly,
Or 'tis decreed that thou shalt quickly die.
Now, mother, said the girl, I told you well;
Come, let us hasten to the hermit's cell;
So much I dread your death, I'll nothing shun;
And if 'tis requisite, I'll even run.
Away then, cried the mother, let us go;
Some pains to dress, the daughter would bestow,
Without reflecting what might be her fare:--
To PLEASE is ev'ry blooming lass's care.

OUR monk was on the watch you may suppose;
A hole he made that would a glimpse disclose;

By which, when near his cell the females drew,
They might, with whip in hand the hermit view,
Who, like a culprit punished for his crimes,
Received the lash, and that so many times,
It sounded like the discipline of schools,
And made more noise than flogging fifty fools.

WHEN first our pilgrims knocked, he would not hear;
And, for the moment, whipping would appear;
The holy lash severely he applied,
Which, through the hole, with pain our females spied;
At length the door he ope'd, but from his eyes
No satisfaction beamed: he showed surprise.
With trembling knees and blushes o'er the face,
The widow now explained the mystick case.
Six steps behind, the beauteous daughter stood,
And waited the decree she thought so good.
The hypocrite howe'er the hermit played,
And sent these humble pilgrims back dismayed.
Said he, the evil spirit much I dread;
No female to my cell should e'er be led;
Excuse me then: such acts would sorrow bring;
From me the HOLY FATHER ne'er spring.
What ne'er from you? the widow straight replied:
And why should not the blessing, pray, be tried?
No other answer howsoe'er she got;
So back they trudged once more to gain their cot.
Ah! mother, said the girl, 'tis my belief,
Our many heavy sins have caused thus grief.

WHEN night arrived and they in sleep were lost,
Again the hermit's horn the woodwork crossed;
Return, return, cried he with horrid tone;
To-morrow you'll have due attention shown;
I've changed the hermit's cold fastidious mind,
And when you come, he'll act as I've designed.

THE couple left their bed at break of day,
And to the cell repaired without delay
Our tale to shorten, Lucius kind appeared
To rigid rules no longer he adhered.
The mother with him let her girl remain,
And hastened to her humble roof again.
The belle complying looked:--he took her arm,
And soon familiar grew with ev'ry charm.

O HYPOCRITES! how oft your wily art
Deceives the world and causes poignant smart.

AT matins they so very often met,
Some awkward indications caused regret.
The fair at length her apron-string perceived
Grew daily shorter, which her bosom grieved;

But nothing to the hermit she'd unfold,
Nor e'en those feelings to her mother told;
She dreaded lest she should be sent away,
And be deprived at once of Cupid's play.
You'll tell me whence so much discernment came?
From this same play:--the tree of art by name.
For sev'n long months the nymph her visits paid;
Her inexperience doubtless wanted aid.

BUT when the mother saw her daughter's case,
She made her thank the monk, and leave the place.
The hermit blessed the Lord for what was done;
A pleasant course his humble slave had run.
He told the mother and her daughter fair,
The child, by God's permission, gifts would share.
Howe'er, be careful, said the wily wight,
That with your infant ev'ry thing goes right;
To you, from thence, great happiness will spring:
You'll reign the parent of what's more than king;
Your relatives to noble rank will rise:
Some will be princes; others lords comprise;
Your nephews cardinals; your cousins too
Will dukes become, if they the truth pursue;
And places, castles, palaces, there'll be,
For you and them of every high degree;
You'll nothing want: eternal is the source,
Like waters flowing in the river's course.
This long prediction o'er: with features grave,
His benediction to them both he gave.

WHEN home returned, the girl, each day and night,
Amused her mind with prospects of delight;
By fancy's aid she saw the future pope,
And all prepared to greet her fondest hope;
But what arrived the whole at once o'erthrew
Hats, dukedoms, castles, vanished from the view:
The promised elevation of the NAME
Dissolved to air:--a little female came!

THE CONVENT GARDENER OF LAMPORECHIO

WHEN Cupid with his dart, would hearts assail,
The rampart most secure is not the VEIL;
A husband better will the FAIR protect,
Than walls or lattices, I much suspect.
Those parents, who in nunneries have got
Their daughters (whether willingly or not),

Most clearly in a glaring error prove,
To fancy God will round their actions move;
'Tis an abuse of what we hold divine;
The Devil with them surely must combine.
Besides, 'twere folly to suppose that vice
Ne'er entered convent walls, and nuns were ice.
A very diff'rent sentiment I hold:
Girls, who in publick move, however bold,
Have greater terrors lest they get a stain;
For, honour lost, they never fame regain.
Few enemies their modesty attack;
The others have but one their minds to rack.
TEMPTATION, daughter of the drowsy dame,
That hates to move, and IDLENESS we name,
Is ever practising each wily art,
To spread her snares around the throbbing heart;
And fond DESIRE, the child of lorn CONSTRAINT,
Is anxious to the soul soft scenes to paint.
If I've a worthy daughter made a nun,
Is that a reason she's a saint?--Mere fun!
Avaunt such folly!--three in four you'll find,
Of those who wear the veil--have changed their mind;
Their fingers bite, and often do much worse:
Those convent vows, full soon, become a curse;
Such things at least have sometimes reached my ear
(For doubtless I must speak from others here);
Of his Boccace a merry tale has told,
Which into rhyme I've put, as you'll behold.

WITHIN a nunnery, in days of yore,
A good old man supplied the garden-store;
The nuns, in general, were smart and gay,
And kept their tongues in motion through the day.
Religious duties they regarded less,
Than for the palour* to be nice in dress
Arranging ev'ry article to please,
That each might captivate and charm at ease;
The changes constantly they rang around,
And made the convent-walls with din resound.
Eight sisters and an abbess held the place,
And strange to say--there DISCORD you might trace.
All nine had youth, and many beauty too:
Young friars round the place were oft in view,
Who reckoned ev'ry step they took so well,
That always in the proper road they fell.
Th' aged gard'ner, of whom ere now we spoke,
Was oft bewildered, they would so provoke;
Capricious, whimsical, from day to day,
Each would command and try to have her way;
And as they ne'er agreed among themselves,
He suffered more than if with fifty elves;
When one was pleased, another soon complained:
At length to quit the nuns he was constrained.

He left them, poor and wretched as he came;
No cross, pile, money:--e'en his coat the same.

A YOUTH of Lamporechio, gay and bold,
One day this gard'ner met as I am told;
And after conversation 'bout the place,
Said, he should like nun's service to embrace,
And that he wished sincerely to be hired:
He'd gratis do whatever was required.
'Twas clear indeed his object was not pelf;
He thought however he might reward himself;
And as the sisters were not over wise,
A nun he now and then might make his prize;
Proceed from one to more with like address,
Till with the whole he'd had complete success.
Said Nuto (such we find the gard'ner's name),
Believe me, friend, you will be much to blame;
Some other service seek, I recommend;
These convent-dames will ne'er their whimseys end.
I'd rather live without or soup or bread,
Than work for them, however nicely fed.

STRANGE creatures are these nuns, upon my word;
Their ways ridiculous and e'en absurd;
Who, with the sisterhood, has never been,
Has clearly yet, not perfect torment seen,
Such service, prithee, never try to gain;
To do what they require I know is vain;
One will have soft, and t'other asks for hard:
Thou'lt be a fool such ninnies to regard;
No work thou'lt do, whatever be the want:
THIS cabbages,--THAT carrots tells thee plant:
Said t'other, fain I'd bring it to the test;
I'm but a simpleton, it is confessed;
Yet still a month in place, and thou wilt see;
How well I with the convent-dames agree.
The reason is, my life is in its prime,
While thou art sunk in years and worn by time,
I'm proper for their work, and only ask,
To be admitted to the drudging task.
Well, said the former, if resolved to try,
To their factotum instantly apply;
Come; let's away. Lead on, the other cried;
I've got a thought, which I'll to you confide:--
I'll seem an idiot, and quite dumb appear.--
In that, said Nuto, only persevere,
And then perhaps the confessor thou'lt find,
With their factotum carelessly inclined;
No fears nor dark suspicions of a mute:
Thou'lt ev'ry way, my friend, their wishes suit.

THE place, as was expected, soon he got;
And half the grounds to trench, at once his lot:

He acted well the nincompoop and fool,
Yet still was steady to the garden tool;
The nuns continually would flock around,
And much amusement in his antics found.

ONE day, as sleeping lay our sprightly wight,
Or feigning sleep, no matter which is right,
(Boccace pretends the latter was the fact)
Two nuns (perhaps not two the most exact,)
Observing him extended on the sward,
While summer's heat from air so much debarred;
That few would venture from the convent-roof,
Lest, 'gainst the sun, their cheeks should not be proof:
Said one, approaching him, let's take this fool,
And place him in the garden-house to cool.
The lad was handsome, with engaging mien:
The nun admired the features she had seen,
And Cupid raised a wish to be at ease,
Where she, without restraint, herself might please.
What would you, cried the other, with him do?
You'll see, rejoined the first, if we pursue;
Just what might be expected from the place;
Christ! said the second (with a cross of grace),
You would not surely do what is forbid?
Suppose increase? it never could be hid;
Besides, should we be seen, 'twill be the cause,
Of dire disgrace to break such sacred laws.

WE shall not be observed, the first replied;
These ills thy fancy forms: haste, let's decide,
And seize the moment while 'tis in our reach,
Without regard to what old dotards teach,
Or what may happen at a future hour;
Here's no one near: 'tis fully in our pow'r;
The time and place so thoroughly agree,
'Twill be impossible our freaks to see;
But 'twill be right that one should watch with care;
While t'other with the lad seeks joys to share,
And irksome gloom endeavours to dispel:
He's dumb, you know, and tales can never tell.
The other answered, since 'tis your desire,
I'll acquiesce and do what you require;
You'll take him first: I see it is your aim;
And since it will oblige, I'll wave my claim;
Go, pleasure seek, and satisfy each wish:
You're always anxious for a fav'rite dish;
'Tis only to oblige that I comply.
That, said the other, clearly I descry;
I'm well persuaded, thou art always kind;
But still I think thou would'st not be inclined;
In such a scene to take the leading part,
Thy bashfulness would counteract thy heart.

Some time the squeamish sister watched the spot;
At length the other, who'd her wishes got,
The station took; the lab'rer tried to please
The second as the first, but less at ease;
So many favours fell not to her share,
And only treble comfort proved her fare.

THE garden-path, and summer-house as well,
Were well remembered by each wanton belle;
No need of guides; and soon our spark contrived;
With sister Agnes also to be hived
A press-house at the convent end he chose,
in which he showed her how soft pleasure flows;
Nor Claudia nor Angelica would miss
The dormitory that, and cellar this;
In short the garret and the vaulted cave
Knew fully how the sisters could behave;
Not one but what he first or last regaled
E'en with the rigid abbess he prevailed,
To take a dance, and as the dame required
Her treble share of what was most admired,
The other nuns were oft obliged to fast,
While with the convent-head his time was passed.

To no restoratives our Wight would run;
Though these do little, where much work is done:
So oft the lad was pressed for cheering play,
That with the abbess, when engaged one day,
He said, where'er I go, 'tis common talk,
With only sev'n an able bird should walk,
Yet constantly I've got no less than nine:--
The abbess cried,--A miracle divine!
Here nuns, pray haste, and quickly come around;
We've fasted with success:--his tongue is found.
The eight encircled him with great surprise;
No longer dumb.--they viewed with eager eyes:
A consultation instantly was had,
When 'twas agreed to honour well the lad,
And try to make him secrecy observe;
But if dismissed, from silence he might swerve.
The active youth, well fed, well paid, thus blessed,
Did all he could,--and others did the rest.
He for the nuns procured a little lot,
That afterward two little friars got,
And in the sequel fathers soon became;
The sisters mothers too, in spite of shame;
But never name more justly was applied:
In vain their mysteries they strove to hide.

* The parlour in a convent is the room where the nuns are permitted to speak to their friends through a lattice.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A pretty wife? Beware the monks as you would guard your life
Monks are knaves in Virtue's mask

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