

“New Life to Traditional Stories”

- Grundtvig Project – France



La Fontaine's fables

The quill-pen of the tales writers from the antiquity and the 17th century could describe the world which surrounds us in the beginning of this third millennium. Tales, more than any other literary type of writing, has got this power of timelessness and universality. “Classics”; very often learnt at school by all generations and transcending French boundaries, fables are part of our inheritance.

Told or, recited by generations of all social classes, by our illiterate or scholars, they retain their freshness and challenge us.

We find it interesting to rest our gaze on what they teach us today, and how modern they are.

La Fontaine's fables, present humanity's hidden bestiary.

Through the animals' nature, and what they're up to, it is the human behaviour which is indeed staged: la Fontaine denounces it or sets it as an example, he questions it as much as he makes fun of it.

The wolf and the dog

La Fontaine stages the encounter between a dog in love with comfort, and a wolf fond of liberty, but he doesn't invite us however to follow a rule of conduct.

Moral there is implicit, although la Fontaine sides with the wolf and the liberty.



What is the meaning of this world, “liberty”, and which idea of liberty is offered in the fable? Liberty with, or without, a collar? Does liberty bear compromise? Each one of us has his own idea of liberty.

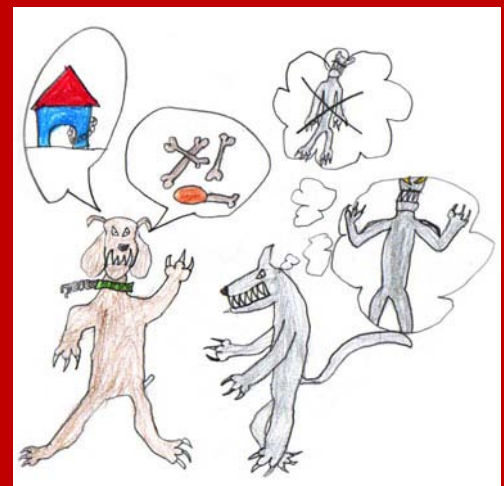
Jean de la Fontaine (born on July 1621, the 8th, in Château-Thierry, dead on April 1695, the 13th, in Paris), French poet of the classical period. The history of literature retains essentially his fables.

However, he's given us various poems, theatre plays, and opera librettos, which confirm his ambition as a moralist.

(a moralist is a writer who proposes, under discontinuous forms, reflections on moral standards, in the etymological Latin meaning of *mos, moris* : human customs and habits, characters and ways of living – in short, human behaviours and actions).

*Fables are not what they appear to be
The simplest animal has the authority
Moral alone brings us all boredom
But fables help the precept to go down
With those sorts of shams you've got to teach and please
For relate only seems to me uninteresting.*

Jean De La Fontaine



The wolf and the dog
Written in Old French

A prowling wolf, whose shaggy skin
(So strict the watch of dogs had been)
Hid little but his bones,
Once met a mastiff dog astray.
A prouder, fatter, sleeker Tray,
No human mortal owns.

Sir Wolf in famish'd plight,
Would fain have made a ration
Upon his fat relation;
But then he first must fight;
And well the dog seem'd able
To save from wolfish table
His carcass snug and tight.
So, then, in civil conversation

The wolf express'd his admiration
Of Tray's fine case. Said Tray, politely,
'Yourself, good sir, may be as sightly;
Quit but the woods, advised by me.

For all your fellows here, I see,
Are shabby wretches, lean and gaunt,
Belike to die of haggard want.

With such a pack, of course it follows,
One fights for every bit he swallows.
Come, then, with me, and share
On equal terms our princely fare.'

'But what with you
Has one to do?'
Inquires the wolf. 'Light work indeed,'
Replies the dog; 'you only need
To bark a little now and then,
To chase off duns and beggar men,
To fawn on friends that come or go forth,
Your master please, and so forth;

For which you have to eat
All sorts of well-cook'd meat--
Cold pullets, pigeons, savoury messes--
Besides unnumber'd fond caresses.'

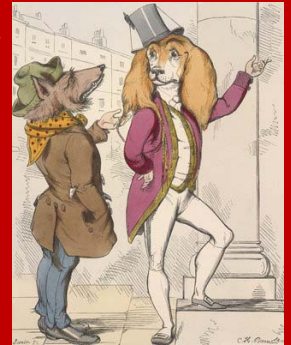
The wolf, by force of appetite,
Accepts the terms outright,
Tears glistening in his eyes.

But faring on, he spies A gall'd spot on the
mastiff's neck.

Le loup et le chien

Un Loup n'avait que les os et la peau,
Tant les chiens faisaient bonne garde.
Ce Loup rencontre un Dogue aussi puissant que
beau,
Gras, poli, qui s'était fourvoyé par mégarde.
L'attaquer, le mettre en quartiers,

Sire Loup l'eût fait volontiers ;
Mais il fallait livrer bataille,
Et le Mâtin était de taille
À se défendre hardiment.



Le Loup donc l'aborde humblement,
Entre en propos, et lui fait compliment
Sur son embonpoint, qu'il admire.
« Il ne tiendra qu'à vous beau sire,
D'être aussi gras que moi, lui répartit le Chien.
Quittez les bois, vous ferez bien :

Vos pareils y sont misérables,
Cancres, haires, et pauvres diables,
Dont la condition est de mourir de faim.

Car quoi ? rien d'assuré : point de franche
lippée :
Tout à la pointe de l'épée.
Suivez-moi : vous aurez un bien meilleur destin.

Le Loup reprit : « Que me faudra-t-il faire ?
- Presque rien, dit le Chien, donner la chasse
aux gens
Portants bâtons, et mendiants ;
Flatter ceux du logis, à son Maître complaire :

Moyennant quoi votre salaire
Sera force reliefs de toutes les façons :
Os de poulets, os de pigeons,
Sans parler de mainte caresse. »

Le Loup déjà se forge une félicité
Qui le fait pleurer de tendresse.

Chemin faisant, il vit le col du Chien pelé.
« Qu'est-ce là ? lui dit-il. - Rien.

'What's that?' he cries. 'O, nothing but a speck.'
'A speck?' Ay, ay; 'tis not enough to pain me;
Perhaps the collar's mark by which they chain
me.'

- *Quoi ? rien ? - Peu de chose.*
- *Mais encor ? - Le collier dont je suis attaché*
De ce que vous voyez est peut-être la cause.

'Chain! chain you! What! run you not, then,
Just where you please, and when?'
'Not always, sir; but what of that?'

- *Attaché ? dit le Loup : vous ne courez donc pas*
Où vous voulez ?
- *Pas toujours ; mais qu'importe ?*

'Enough for me, to spoil your fat!
It ought to be a precious price
Which could to servile chains entice;

- *Il importe si bien, que de tous vos repas*
Je ne veux en aucune sorte,

For me, I'll shun them while I've wit.'
So ran Sir Wolf, and runneth yet.

Et ne voudrais pas même à ce prix un trésor. »
Cela dit, maître Loup s'enfuit, et court encor.

Jean de La Fontaine, Fable V.

Jean de La Fontaine, Fable V.



[Simplified new translation](#) - The wolf and the dog

There was once a Wolf who got very little to eat because the Dogs of the village were so wide awake and watchful. He was really nothing but skin and bones, and it made him very downhearted to think of it.

One night this Wolf happened to fall in with a fine fat House Dog who had wandered a little too far from home. The Wolf would gladly have eaten him then and there, but the House Dog looked strong enough to leave his marks should he try it. So the Wolf spoke very humbly to the Dog, complimenting him on his fine appearance.

"You can be as well-fed as I am if you want to," replied the Dog. "Leave the woods; there you live miserably. Why, you have to fight hard for every bite you get. Follow my example and you will get along beautifully."

"What must I do?" asked the Wolf.

"Hardly anything," answered the House Dog. "Chase people who carry canes, bark at beggars, and fawn on the people of the house. In return you will get tidbits of every kind, chicken bones, choice bits of meat, sugar, cake, and much more beside, not to speak of kind words and caresses."

The Wolf had such a beautiful vision of his comfort that he was not long in coming to the village. He noticed that the hair on the Dog's neck was worn and the skin was chafed.

"What is that on your neck?"

"Nothing at all," replied the Dog.

"What! nothing!"

"Oh, just a trifle!"

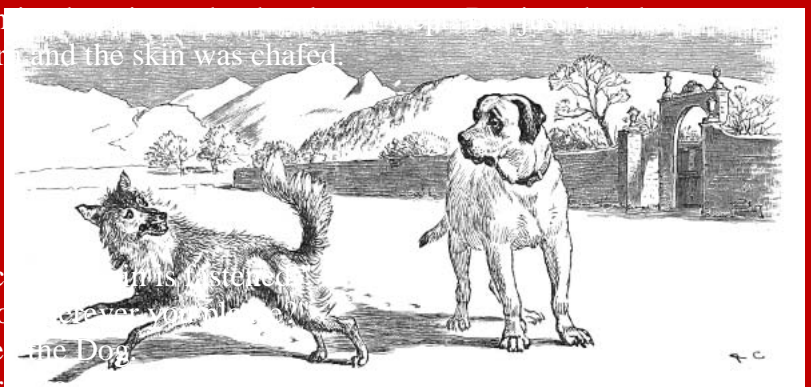
"But please tell me."

"Perhaps you see the mark of the collar to which I am attached."

"What! A chain!" cried the Wolf. "Don't you get weary of it?"

"Not always! But what's the difference?" replied the Dog.

"All the difference in the world! I don't care a rap for your roasts and I wouldn't take all the tender young lambs in the world at that price." And away ran the Wolf to the woods.



There is nothing worth so much as liberty.



