

Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine — Volume 03 eBook

Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine — Volume 03 by Jean de La Fontaine

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Page 1

Title: The Tales and Novels, v3: The Muleteer and Others

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*The tales and novels
of
J. De La Fontaine*

Volume 3.

Contains:
The Muleteer
The Servant Girl Justified
The Three Gossips' Wager

The muleteer

*The Lombard princes oft pervade my mind;
The present tale Boccace relates you'll find;
Agiluf was the noble monarch's name;
Teudelingua he married, beauteous dame,
The last king's widow, who had left no heir,
And whose dominions proved our prince's share.*

*No Beauty round compare could with the queen;
And ev'ry blessing on the throne was seen,
When Cupid, in a playful moment, came,*



And o'er Agiluf's stable placed his flame;
There left it carelessly to burn at will,
Which soon began a muleteer to fill,
With *love's* all-powerful, all-consuming fire,
That naught controls, and youthful breasts desire.

*The*muleteer was pleasing to the sight:
Gallant, good-humoured, airy, and polite,
And ev'ry way his humble birth belied;
A handsome person, nor was sense denied;
He showed it well, for when the youth beheld,
With eyes of love, the queen, who all excelled,
And ev'ry effort anxiously had made,
To stop the flames that would his heart invade;
When vain it proved, he took a prudent part:—

Whocan, like Cupid, manage wily art?
Whate'er stupidity we may discern,
His pupils more within a day can learn,
Than *Masters* knowledge in the schools can gain,
Though they in study should ten years remain;
The lowest clown he presently inspires,
With ev'ry tendency that love requires;
Of this our present tale's a proof direct,
And none that feel—its truths will e'er suspect:

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*The*am'rous muleteer his thoughts employed;
Consid'ring how his wish might be enjoyed.
Without success to certainty were brought,
Life seemed to him not worth a slender thought;
To hazard ev'ry thing; to live or die!
Possession have!—or in the grave to lie!

*The*Lombard custom was, that when the king,
Who slept not with his queen, (a common thing
In other countries too), desired to greet
His royal consort, and in bed to meet,
A night-gown solely o'er his back he threw,
And then proceeded to the interview,
Knocked softly at the door, on which a fair,
Who waited on the queen with anxious care,
Allowed the prince to enter; took his light,
(Which only glimmered in the midst of night,)
Then put it out, and quickly left the room:—
A little lantern to dispel the gloom,
With waxen taper that emitted rays—
In diff'rent countries various are their ways!

*Our*wily, prying, crafty muleteer,
Knew well these forms were current through the year:
He, like the king, at night himself equipped,
And to the queen's superb apartment slipped.
His face concealed the fellow tried to keep;
The waiting dame was more than half asleep;
The lover got access:—soon all was clear;
The prince's coming he had but to fear,
And, as the latter had, throughout the day,
The chase attended an extensive way,
'Twas more than probable he'd not be led,
(Since such fatigue he'd had,) to quit his bed.

Perfumed, quite neat, and lively as a bird,
Our spark (safe entered) uttered not a word.
'Twas often customary with the king,
When state affairs, or other weighty thing,
Displeasure gave, to take of love his fill,
Yet let his tongue the while continue still.
A singularity we needs must own,
With this the wife was long familiar grown.



Ouram'rous wight more joys than one received,
If our narrator of the tale's believed;
(In bed a muleteer is worth three kings,
And value oft is found in humble things.)
The queen began to think her husband's rage
Had proved a stimulus such wars to wage,
And made him wond'rous stout in pleasure's sport,
Though all the while his thoughts were-'bout the court.

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With perfect justice Heav'n its gifts bestows;
But equal talents all should not compose.
The prince's virtues doubtless were designed,
To take command, and govern o'er mankind.
The lawyer, points of difficulty views,
Decides with judgment, and the truth pursues.
In Cupid's scenes the muleteer succeeds:—
Each has his part:—none universal needs.

With pleasures feasted, our gallant retired,
Before the morn fresh blushes had acquired.
But scarcely had he left the tender scene,
'Ere king Agiluf came to see his queen,
Who much surprise expressed, and to him said:
My dear, I know your love, but from this bed,
You'll recollect how recently you went,
And having wonders done, should be content.
For heav'n's sake, consider more your health;
'Tis dearer far to me than Croesus' wealth.

*With*in the royal breast suspicions rose,
But nothing then the monarch would disclose.
He instantly withdrew without a word;
His sentiments to speak had been absurd,
And to the stable flew, since he believed
The circumstances, which his bosom grieved,
Whate'er mysterious doubts might then appear,
Proceeded from some am'rous muleteer.

When round the dorture he began to creep,
The troop appeared as if dissolved in sleep,
And so they truly were, save our gallant,
Whose terrors made him tremble, sigh, and pant:
No light the king had got; it still was dark;
Agiluf groped about to find the spark,
Persuaded that the culprit might be known,
By rapid beating of the pulse alone.
The thought was good; to feel the prince began,
And at the second venture, found his man,
Who, whether from the pleasures he'd enjoyed,
Or fear, or dread discov'ry to avoid,
Experienced (spite of ev'ry wily art,)
At once quick beating of the pulse and heart.

In doubt how this adventure yet might end,
He thought to seem asleep would him befriend.

Meanwhile the king, though not without much pains,
Obtained the scissors used for horses' manes.
With these, he said, I'll mark the fond gallant,
That I may know again the one I want.

Then monarch from the muleteer with care,
In front, snipt off a bulky lock of hair.
This having done, he suddenly withdrew;
But carelessly away the trophy threw;
Of which the sly gallant advantage took,
And thus the prince's subtle project shook;
For instantly began our artful spark,
His fellow servants like himself to mark.

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Whenday arrived the monarch was surprised,
To see each muleteer alike disguised;
No hair in front of either now was seen;
Why, how is this? said he: What can it mean?
Fifteen or more, if I believe my sight,
My wife has satisfied this very night.
Well! well! he'll now escape if mum he prove;
But there again I trust he ne'er shall move.

The servant girl justified

Boccace alone is not my only source;
T'another shop I now shall have recourse;
Though, certainly, this famed Italian wit
Has many stories for my purpose fit.
But since of diff'rent dishes we should taste;
Upon an ancient work my hands I've placed;
Where full a hundred narratives are told,
And various characters we may behold;
From life, Navarre's fair queen the fact relates;
My story int'rest in her page creates;
Beyond dispute from her we always find,
Simplicity with striking art combin'd.
Yet, whether 'tis the queen who writes, or not;
I shall, as usual, here and there allot
Whate'er additions requisite appear;
Without such license I'd not persevere,
But quit, at once, narrations of the sort;
Some may be long, though others are too short.

Letus proceed, howe'er (our plan explained:)
A pretty servant-girl a man retain'd.
She pleas'd his eye, and presently he thought,
With ease she might to am'rous sports be brought;
He prov'd not wrong; the wench was blithe and gay,
A buxom lass, most able ev'ry way.

Atdawn, one summer's morn, the spark was led
To rise, and leave his wife asleep in bed;
He sought at once the garden, where he found
The servant-girl collecting flow'rs around,
To make a nosegay for his better half,
Whose birth-day 'twas:—he soon began to laugh,
And while the ranging of the flow'rs he prais'd,



The servant's neckerchief he slyly rais'd.
Who, suddenly, on feeling of the hand,
Resistance feign'd, and seem'd to make a stand;
But since these liberties were nothing new,
They other fun and frolicks would pursue;
The nosegay at the fond gallant was thrown;
The flow'rs he kiss'd, and now more ardent grown
They romp'd and rattl'd, play'd and skipt around;
At length the fair one fell upon the ground;
Our am'rous spark advantage took of this,
And nothing with the couple seem'd amiss.

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Unluckily, a neighbour's prying eyes
Beheld their playful pranks with great surprise,
She, from her window, could the scene o'erlook;
When this the fond gallant observ'd, he shook;
Said he, by heav'ns! our frolicking is seen,
By that old haggard, envious, prying quean;
But do not heed it; instantly he chose
To run and wake his wife, who quickly rose;—
So much the dame he fondl'd and caress'd,
The garden walk she took at his request,
To have a nosegay, where he play'd anew
Pranks just the same as those of recent view,
Which highly gratified our lady fair,
Who felt dispos'd, and would at eve repair,
To her good neighbour, whom she bursting found,
With what she'd seen that morn upon the ground.

The usual greetings o'er, our envious dame,
With scowling brow exclaim'd,—my dear, your fame,
I love too much not fully to detail,
What I have witnessed, and with truth bewail;
Will you continue, in your house to keep
A girl, whose conduct almost makes me weep?
Anon I'd kick her from your house, I say;
The strumpet should not stay another day.
The wife replied, you surely are deceiv'd;
An honest, virtuous creature she's believ'd.
Well, I can easily, my friend, suppose,
Rejoin'd the neighbour, whence this favour flows;
But look about, and be convinc'd, this morn
From my own window (true as you are born,)
Within the garden I your husband spi'd
And presently the servant girl I ey'd;
At one another various flow'rs they threw,
And then the minx a little graver grew.
I understand you, cried the list'ning fair;
You are deceiv'd:—myself alone was there.

Neighbour

But patience, if you please: attend I pray
You've no conception what I meant to say:
The playful fair was actively employ'd,
In plucking am'rous flow'rs—they kiss'd and toy'd.



Wife

'Twas clearly I, howe'er, for her you took.

Neighbour

The flow'rs for bosoms quickly they forsook;
Large handfuls frequently they seem'd to grasp,
And ev'ry beauty in its turn to clasp.

Wife

But still, why think you, friend, it was not I?
Has not your spouse with you a right to try
What freaks he likes?

Neighbour

But then, upon the ground
This girl was thrown, and never cried nor frown'd;
You laugh.—

Wife

Indeed I do, 'twas myself.

Neighbour

A flannel petticoat display'd



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the elf.

Wife

'Twas mine:

Neighbour

Be patient:—and inform me, pray,
If this were worn by you or her to-day?
There lies the point, for, if you'll me believe,
Your husband did—the most you can conceive.

Wife

How hard of credence!—'twas myself I vow.

Neighbour

Oh! that's conclusive; I'll be silent now;
Though truly I am led to think, my eyes
Are pretty sharp, and much I feel surprise
At what you say; in fact, I would have sworn,
I saw them thus at romps this very morn;
Excuse the hint, and do not turn her off.

Wife

Why, turn her off?—the very thought I scoff;
She serves me well.

Neighbour

And so it seems is taught;
By all means keep her then, since thus she's thought.

The three gossips' Wager

As o'er their wine one day, three gossips sat,
Discoursing various pranks in pleasant chat,
Each had a loving friend, and two of these
Most clearly managed matters at their ease. *Said* one, a princely husband I have got.
A better in the world there's surely not;



With him I can adjust as humour fits,
No need to rise at early dawn, like cits,
To prove to him that two and three make four,
Or ask his leave to ope or shut the door.

*Upon*my word, replied another fair,
If he were mine, I openly declare,
To judge from what so pleasantly you say,
I'd make a present of him new-year's day.
For pleasure never gives me full delight,
Unless a little pain the bliss invite.
No doubt your husband moves as he is led;
Thank heav'n a different mortal claims my bed;
To take him in, great nicety we need;
But howsoe'er, at times I can succeed;
The satisfaction doubly then is felt:—
In fond emotion bosoms freely melt.
With neither of you, husband or gallant,
Would I exchange, though these so much you vaunt.

*On*this, the third with candour interfer'd;
She thought that oft the god of love appear'd,
Good husbands playfully to fret and vex,
Sometimes to rally couples: then perplex;
But warmer as the conversation grew,
She, anxious that each disputant might view
Herself victorious, (or believe it so,)
Exclaim'd, if either of you wish to show
Who's in the right, with argument have done,
And let us practise some new scheme of fun,
To dupe our husbands; she who don't succeed
Shall pay a forfeit; all replied, "Agreed."

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But then, continued she, we ought to take
An oath, that we will full discov'ry make,
To one another of the various facts,
Without disguising even trifling acts.
And then, good upright Macae shall decide;
Thus things arrang'd, the ladies homeward plied.

She, 'mong the three, who felt the most constraint
Ador'd a youth, contemporaries paint,
Well made and handsome, but with beardless chin,
Which led the pair a project to begin;
For yet no opportunity they'd found,
T' enjoy their wishes, save by stealth around;
Most ardently she sought to be at ease,
And 'twas agreed the lucky thought to seize
That like a chambermaid he should be dress'd,
And then proceed to execute the jest,
Attend upon the wily, wedded pair,
And offer services with modest air
And downcast eyes; the husband on her leer'd,
And in her favour prepossess'd appear'd,
In hopes one day, to find those pleasing charms
Resign'd in secret to his longing arms.
Such pretty cheeks and sparkling eyes he thought,
Had ne'er till then his roving fancy caught;
The girl was hir'd, but seemingly with pain,
Since *Prudence* ultimately might complain,
That (maid and master both so very young)
'Twould not be wonderful if things went wrong.

Atfirst the husband inattention show'd,
And scarcely on the maid a look bestow'd;
But presently he chang'd his conduct quite,
And presents gave, with promises not slight;
At length the servant feign'd to lend an ear,
And anxious seem'd obliging to appear.

*The*trap our cunning lovers having laid,
One eve this message brought the smiling maid;
My lady, sir, is ill, and rest requires,



To sleep alone to-night she much desires.
To grant the master's wish the girl was led,
And they together hurried off to bed.

The husband 'tween the sheets himself had plac'd;
The nymph was in her petticoat, unlac'd;
When suddenly appear'd the wily wife,
And promis'd harmony was turn'd to strife.
Are these your freaks, cried she with mark'd surprise;
Your usual dish it seems then don't suffice;
You want, indeed, to have some nicer fare?
A little sooner, by the saints I swear,
You'd me a pretty trick, 'tis clear, have shown,
And doubtless, then, tit bits to keep been prone.
This, howsoe'er, to get you're not design'd,
So

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elsewhere you may try what you can find.

And as to you, miss Prettyface, you jade,
Good heav'ns! to think a paltry servant maid
Should rival me? I'll beat you black and blue!
The bread I eat, indeed, must be for you?
But I know better, and indeed am clear,
Not one around will fancy I appear
So void of charms, so faded, wither'd, lost,
That I should out of doors at once be tost;
But I will manage matters:—I design
This girl no other bed shall have than mine;
Then who so bold to touch her there will dare?
Come, Miss, let's to my room at once repair;
Away—your things to-morrow you can seek;
If scandal 'twould spread around, I'd wreak
My vengeance instantly, and turn you out;
But I am lenient, and desire no rout;
Perhaps your ruin may be sav'd by care;
So night and day your company I'll share;
No more my bosom then will feel dismay,
For I shall see that you no frolicks play.

Onthis the trembling girl, o'ercome with fears;
Held down her head and seem'd to hide her tears;
Pick'd up her clothes and quickly stole away,
As if afraid her mistress more might say;
And hop'd to act the maid while Sol gave light,
But play at ease the fond gallant at night;
At once she fill'd two places in the house,
And thought in both the husband she should chouse,
Who bless'd his stars that he'd escap'd so well,
And sneak'd alone to rest within his cell,
While our gay, am'rous pair advantage took,
To play at will, and ev'ry solace hook,
Convinc'd most thoroughly, once lovers kiss'd,
That *opportunity* should n'er be miss'd.
Here ends the trick our wily gossip play'd;
But now let's see the plot another laid.

Theseccond dame, whose husband was so meek,
That only from her lips the truth he'd seek,
When seated with him 'neath a pear tree's shade,



Contriv'd at ease and her arrangement made.
The story I shall presently relate;
The butler, strong, well dress'd, and full of prate:
Who often made the other servants trot,
Stood near when madam hit upon her plot,
To whom she said, I wish the fruit to taste;
On which the man prepar'd with ev'ry haste,
To climb the tree, and off the produce shook;
But while above, the fellow gave a look
Upon the ground below, and feign'd he saw
The spouse and wife—do more than kiss and paw:
The servant rubb'd his eyes, as if in doubt,

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And cried: why truly, sir, if you're so stout,
That you must revel 'mid your lady's charms,
Pray elsewhere take her to your longing arms,
Where you at ease may frolick hours or days,
Without my witnessing your loving ways;
Indeed, I'm quite surprised at what I spy
In publick, 'neath a tree such pranks to try!
And, if you don't a servant's presence heed,
With decency howe'er you should proceed.
What, still go on? for shame, I say, for shame!
Pray wait till by and by; you're much to blame;
Besides, the nights are long enough you'll find;
Heav'n genial joys for privacy design'd;
And why this place, when you've nice chambers got?
What, cried the lady, says this noisy sot?
He surely dreams; Where can he learn these tales?
Come down; let's see what 'tis the fellow ails.
Down William came. How? said the master, how?
Are we at play?

William

Not now, sir, no, not now.

Husband

Why, when then, friend?

William

While I was in the tree,
Alive, sir, flay me, if I did not see
You on the verdant lawn my lady lay,
And kiss, and toy, and other frolicks play.

Wife

'Twere surely better if thou held'st thy tongue,
Or thou'lt a beating get before 'tis long.

Husband

No, no, my dear, he's mad, and I design
The fellow in a madhouse to confine.

William

Is't folly, pray, to see what we behold?

Wife

What hast thou seen?

William

What I've already told:—
My master and yourself at Cupid's game,
Or else the tree 's enchanted I proclaim.

Wife

Enchanted! nonsense; such a sight to see!

Husband

To know the truth myself, I'll climb the tree,
Then you the fact will quickly from me learn;
We may believe what we ourselves discern.

Soon as the master they above descried,
And that below our pair he sharply eyed,
The butler took the lady in his arms,
And grew at once familiar with her charms;
At sight of this the husband gave a yell:
Made haste to reach the ground, and nearly fell;
Such liberties he wish'd at once to stop,
Since what he'd seen had nearly made him drop.
How! how!—cried he:—what, e'en before my sight?
What can you mean? said she without affright.

Husband

DAR'ST thou to ask again?

Wife

And why not, pray?

Husband

Fine, pretty doings!—Presently you'll say;
That what I've seen 'tis folly to believe.



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Wife

Too much is this:—such accusations grieve.

Husband

Thou did'st most clearly suffer his embrace.

Wife

I? *Why*, you dream!

Husband

This seems a curious case.

My reason's flown! or have I lost my eyes?

Wife

Can you suppose my character I prize
So very little, that these pranks I'd play
Before your face, when I might ev'ry day
Find minutes to divert myself at will,
And (if lik'd such frolicks) take my fill?

Husband

I *know* not what to think nor what to do;
P'rhaps this same tree can tricks at will pursue;
Let's see again; aloft he went once more,
And William acted as he'd done before;
But now the husband saw the playful squeeze;
Without emotion, and returned at ease.
To find the cause, said he, no longer try,
The tree's enchanted, we may well rely.

Since, that's the fact, replied the cunning jade;
To burn it, quickly William seek fort aid;
The tree accurst no longer shall remain;
Her will the servant wish'd not to restrain,
But soon some workmen brought, who felled the tree;
And wondered what the fault our fair could see.
Down hew it, cried the lady, that's your task;
More concerns you not; folly 'tis to ask.



Our second gossip thus obtained success;
But now the third: we'll see if she had less:
To female friends she often visits paid,
And various pastimes there had daily play'd;
A leering lover who was weary grown,
Desired *one* night she'd meet him quite alone.
Two, if you will, replied the smiling fair;
A trifle 'tis you ask, and I'll repair
Where'er you wish, and we'll recline at ease;
My husband I can manage, if I please,
While thus engag'd.—The parties soon agreed;
But still the lady for her wits had need,
Since her dear man from home but rarely went,
No pardons sought at Rome, but was content
With what he nearer got, while his sweet wife
More fondness mark'd for gratifying life,
And ever anxious, warmest zeal to show,
Was always wishing distant scenes to know;
As pilgrim oft she'd trod a foreign road,
But now desir'd those ancient ways t'explode;
A plan more rare and difficult she sought,
And round her toe our wily dame bethought,
To tie a pack-thread, fasten'd to the door,
Which open'd to the street: then feign'd to snore
Beside her husband, Harry Berlinguier,
(So, usually, they nam'd her wedded dear.)

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HOWE'ER, so cunningly with him she dealt,
That Harry turn'd, and soon the pack-thread felt,
Which rais'd distrust, and led him to suspect
Some bad design the thread was meant t'effect.

A little time, as if asleep, he lay
Considering how to act, or what to say;
Then rose, (his spouse believing not awake,)
And softly treading, lest the room should shake;
The pack-thread follow'd to the outer door,
And thence concluded (what he might deplore,)
That his dear partner from her faith would stray,
And some gallant that night design'd to play
The lover's part and draw the secret clue,
When she would rise, and with him freaks pursue,
While he (good husband!) quietly in bed
Might sleep, not dreaming that his wife had fled.

For otherwise, what use such pains to take?
A visit cuckoldom, perhaps, might make;
An honour that he'd willingly decline;
On which he studied how to countermine;
And like a sentinel mov'd to and fro',
To watch if any one would thither go
To pull the string, that he could see with ease,
And then he'd instantly the culprit seize.

The, reader will perceive, we may suppose,
Besides the entrance which the husband chose,
On t'other side a door, where our gallant
Could enter readily, as he might want,
And there the spark a chambermaid let in:—
Oft servants prone are found a bribe to win.

While Berlinguier thus watch'd around and round;
The friends with one another pleasures found;
But heav'n alone knows how nor what they were:—
No fact transpir'd save all was free from care;
So well the servant kept the careful watch,
That not a chance was given the pair to catch:

The spark at dawn the lady left alone,
And ere the husband came the bird was flown;
Then Harry, weary, took his place again,



Complaining, that he'd felt such racking pain,
And dreading, lest alarms her breast should seize,
Within another room he'd sought for ease.

Two days had pass'd, when madam thought once more,
To set the thread, as she had done before;
He left the bed, pretending he was sick,
Resumed his post; again the lover came,
And, with my lady, play'd the former game.

*The*scheme so well succeeded, that the pair
Thrice wish'd to try the wily pack-thread snare;
The husband with the cholic mov'd away,
His place the bold gallant resum'd till day.

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Atlength their ardour 'gan, it seems, to cool,
And Harry, they no longer tried to fool;
'Twas time to seek the myst'ry of the plot,
Since, to three acts, the comedy was got.

Atmidnight, when the spark had left the bed;
A servant, by his orders, drew the thread;
On whom the husband, without fear, laid hold,
And with him enter'd like a soldier bold,
Not then supposing he'd a valet seiz'd;
Well tim'd it prov'd, howe'er;—the lady pleas'd
Her voice to raise, on hearing what was said,
And through the house confusion quickly spread.

*The*valet now before them bent the knee,
And openly declar'd, he came to see
The chambermaid, whom he was wont to greet,
And by the thread to rouse when time to meet:

*Are*these your knavish tricks, replied the dame,
With eyes upon her maid that darted flame;
When I by chance observ'd about your toe,
A thread one night, I then resolv'd to know
Your scheme in full, and round my own I tied
A clue, on which I thoroughly relied,
To catch this gay gallant, that you pretend
Your husband will become, I apprehend.

Be that as 'twill, to-night from hence you go.
My dear, said Berlinguier, I'd fain say no;
Let things remain until to-morrow, pray
And then my lady presently gave way.
A fortune Harry on the girl bestow'd;
The like our valet to his master ow'd;
To church the happy couple smiling went:—
They'd known each other long, and were content.

*Th*usended then, the third and last amour;
The trio hasten'd Macae to implore,
To say which gain'd the bet, who soon replied:—
I find it, friends, not easy to decide.

*The*case hangs up, and there will long remain;
'Tis often thus when justice we'd obtain:

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

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