The Morality of the Fables of La Fontaine

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THE MORALITY OF THE FABLES OF LA FONTAINE

by

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VITA

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CHAPTER ONE

La Fontaine more than any other great French writer reveals himself in his writings. Corneille, Racine, even Molière seem to speak to us from behind drawn curtains. La Fontaine is always lifting the curtains or drawing them aside to let us glimpse his charming nature. Truly, there is nothing extraordinary about his life, nothing unusual. He loved the simple, humble, good things of life. Perhaps that explains his universal appeal. The very mention of his name causes people to smile. One can't help but expand at the remembrance of the "bonhomme" La Fontaine.

At Chateau-Thierry July 8, 1621, Jean de La Fontaine was born to Charles de La Fontaine and Francoise Pidoux. The La Fontaines had no legal claim to nobility. Occasionally the father would use the title "l'Ecuyer," a usurpation he later regretted. Because of it he was fined some two thousand livres.

Due to the fact that Jean was raised in an atmosphere of forest caretakers (his father and grandfather both were "keepers of the royal forests and waters"), hunters, and gay companions, one can easily imagine that his early schooling was a bit intermittent. He yielded frequently to the temptation to play truant. A great part of his early childhood was spent with his father and grandfather accompanying them on their inspection of the royal grounds. Many a time after returning from one of these tours of inspection Jean would amuse himself in his grandfather's library. This library contained, accord-
ing to the custom of the period, the poets, conteurs, translators of the fif­
teenth and sixteenth centuries. Alain Chartier, Marot, Ronsard, Rabelais,
Bonaventure des Periers, Amyot, and Montaigne; then the contemporary writers
such as Malherbe, Racan, d'Urfé, Voiture mixed with the celebrated Italian
authors Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tasso. Traits and characteristics of the poet's
writings may be traced to these early browsings in his grandfather's library.

Thus with his father and grandfather as tutors, Jean learned a little
about the trade of "keeper of the forests." However, his knowledge was only
superficial. Birds, animals, insects, in fact, all nature itself, was more
conformable to his tastes than a trade or even books. He was happiest when
alone listening to the mild voice of nature. These reveries, intimate chats
with nature, furnished him with material that he later blended into his
Fables.

At the age of fourteen he began his formal education. He attended the
college at Chateau-Thierry. A monk from the Monastery of Val-Secret was his
teacher. Spelling, grammar, Latin, theology were on the curriculum. Although
La Fontaine had the intelligence, he lacked the self discipline necessary for
the mastery of these subjects. Hence he didn't do well in the opinion of his
teacher. While at school of Chateau-Thierry, La Fontaine formed a strong
friendship with François Maucroix; a friendship which lasted the rest of his
life.

It is very probable that La Fontaine also attended the college of
Rheims. Proof of it is found in a book of Maucroix's in which the following
may be seen: "Jean de La Fontaine, bon garçon, fort sage, et fort modeste."

It is certain that Maucroix attended this school.

School teachers never were popular with La Fontaine. It was their pedantic manners and airs that displeased him most. In "Contre un pedant de collège" we read:

Il est trois points dans l'homme de collège
Présomption, injures, et mauvais sens.

The cause of his deep-seated dislike is in all probability due to the fact that they curbed his liberty of action and thought—two things that he treasured highly.

On April 27, 1641, La Fontaine entered the seminary of the Oratory. He believed himself called to the ecclesiastical state. But he was mistaken. The rules of the religious life held no more attraction for him than had those of his life as a student. He himself says that he preferred to read the poets rather than Christian Perfection.

After one year he left the seminary. For a short time he applied himself to writing verse. Horace, Virgil, the best French authors were his models and source of inspiration. Pintrel, a relative, praised and encouraged his literary efforts. During this same period he began to court several girls of the neighborhood. His father then counseled him to marry. He did so on November 10, 1647. His young wife was Marie Héricart. Tallement, speaking of the marriage, says that La Fontaine married solely to please his father.

Be that as it may, his married life, as much as there was of it, was not
happy. His motive for marriage, the wife that he chose, his independent nature, all united to make it miserable for himself, his wife, and his child. Marie Héricart was beautiful but frivolous and ambitious to appear learned. She neglected her household to preside over the salon she set up at Chateau-Thierry. She as queen; La Fontaine, as king. But her husband resented her efforts to appear learned. Simple of taste himself he wanted his wife the same.

Some blame La Fontaine, others, his wife for this unhappy state of affairs. Perhaps it would be closer to the truth and fairer to say that their dispositions were unsuited. One was not the complement of the other. I have already said that Marie Héricart was beautiful but frivolous and neglectful of household duties. La Fontaine, according to Vicomte de Broc, was a man entirely given to things of the mind and imagination, who knew how to be neither husband nor father, forgetful of the serious duties of life, faithful only to his muse and always a poet.¹ From this it is easy to imagine the difficulties that arose between the two. The fabulist himself admits that to be a father of a family is neither a privilege nor a pleasure.

Toi donc, qui que tu sois, père de famille,
Et je ne t'ai jamais envie cet honneur.

Hence, after numerous difficulties arising from their varied dispositions, La Fontaine decided to separate from his wife. He did it without scandal, without much ado, as incapable of malice as he was of constancy. He left her

¹La Fontaine Moraliste, Vicomte de Broc, p. 19.
to follow his muse.

Poet that he was he had to express his genius. Thus we see him at the age of thirty-five with Fouquet, minister of Finance. Fouquet at that time was at the height of his power. As did all the powerful of the period he encouraged literature by aiding people of proven talent or those who had neither money nor influence to make their worth known.

La Fontaine wrote a poem Adonis and addressed it to Fouquet. The poem pleased the vanity of the minister and he granted its author a pension of a thousand livres. In exchange for this pension he had to write poetry according to the desire of his protector. From this period on date a small number of short poems, odes, ballads, madrigals.

This sojourn at the court of Fouquet brought him in contact with the society of his day: Mme de Sévigné, Mlle de Scudery, Desmarests, Conrart, Chapelain, and poets whom Boileau was soon to ridicule. However, the fall of Fouquet put an end to this life for La Fontaine. Louis XIV discovered that his minister of finance was enriching himself at the expense of the state. The king deprived him of office, disgraced him, and sent him into exile. It was then that La Fontaine wrote the Elégie aux Nymphes de Vaux intended to soften the King's anger against his former minister. Two years later he again tried to appease Louis XIV's wrath by an ode. All in vain. Fouquet was imprisoned for life in the fortress of Pignerol.

It has been stated that the sojourn at Vaux harmed the genius of La Fontaine. Certainly if one examines that which he wrote during that period,
one can't help but proclaim it mediocre. He seems to be but a disciple of Marot and of Voiture. It is not La Fontaine who writes. Saint-Beuve claims that Fouquet's disgrace was fortunate for La Fontaine. According to that critic, if he had remained at Vaux, he would never have written his Fables. The influence of Boileau, Racine, and Molière was necessary for him. It was Boileau above all who prompted him to write his Fables by making him see that he was not a courtier by temperament. According to the same Saint-Beuve there are two La Fontaines: one before, the other after Boileau.

In 1664 La Fontaine returned to Paris and lived with the Duchess of Orleans in the palace of Luxembourg. He remained there till the Duchess died in 1672. Because he found the company dull and rather sad in this home he frequently visited the Hôtel de Bouillon, then a rendez-vous for libertines. It was for this society that he wrote his Contes. During this same period, as he tells us at the beginning of his Psyché, he was frequently in the company of Boileau, Racine, Molière, and Chapelle. With these friends his style matured and he formed a literary ideal much superior to the Contes. This change for the better was easily seen in 1668 when he published the first six books of his Fables dedicated to the Dauphin and in 1669 when he gave his public Psyché. The real La Fontaine was born.

When the Duchess of Orleans died La Fontaine needed another protector. Madame de La Sablière filled that want. The home of Mme. de la Sablière was serious without constraint and learned without pedantry. Some of the most learned men of the time were wont to meet in her parlors. She was a pro-
tectress and mother to La Fontaine. On his side La Fontaine was very grateful for the twenty-years' care she lavished on him. She, too, was grateful to the genius of the author. After her conversion when she retired from the world to devote her time to the care of the sick, she wrote a friend: "I have cut myself off from practically everyone. I have kept only my dog, my cat, and La Fontaine."

In 1678 La Fontaine published some new Contes which caused quite a scandal. Then he published the third part of his Fables, two books in all. By the very fact that he dedicated this part of Madame de Montespan, the reigning court favorite, he shows us he could play the courtier if he wanted to.

The success of the third part of his Fables was sufficiently great to cause him to be presented to the Academy. Some vehemently opposed his election on the grounds that his Contes had been put under police censure. However, when the vote was cast, La Fontaine's supporters won. This was in 1683. It was not until 1684 that he was admitted. The reason for the year's delay was that Louis XIV wanted Boileau to be put in before La Fontaine. Perhaps the king did not want to approve of the Contes, the open license of which shocked many. Better perhaps is that Colbert never liked La Fontaine for his loyalty to Fouquet whom Colbert had had deposed and whose position of minister of finance he now held. At any rate it was only after Boileau had been admitted to the Academy that the king confirmed the election of La Fontaine.

On May 2, 1684 he pronounced his discourse before his fellow Academicians.
He discreetly promised his confrères that he would follow the good example they would give him. In concluding he read a discourse in verse dedicated to Madame de la Sablière in which he paid a grateful tribute to her who had so long been his protectress. At the same time he charmingly gave his own portrait.

Je suis chose légère et vole à tout objet.
Je vais de fleur en fleur et d'objet en objet.

He thereby indicated that his predominant fault was inconstancy.

In 1692 La Fontaine was attacked with serious illness. Mme de la Sablière (she had recently retired from the world to spend her last years in works of mercy for the sick) came to see him. She was particularly anxious about the state of his soul. The Vicar of St. Roch knew of a young priest, the son of a friend of La Fontaine. He asked this young priest, Abbé Pouget, to attend the poet and to prepare him for death. For this end the young abbé visited La Fontaine twice daily. Finally his efforts were rewarded. La Fontaine confessed, retracted the evil he may have caused society by his Contes and received Viaticum. The retraction was made in the presence of a number of fellow Academicians. The Abbé Pouget testifies that he found La Fontaine as simple in evil as in good. A fact that his life-long friend confirms when he says, "I do not think he ever told a lie in all his life."

After a long illness La Fontaine so far recovered as to live two more years. In 1694 he gave to the press his last book of Fables. He continued to live on the kindness of his friends. Although Madame de la Sablière had died, he soon found someone else to look after him. It was M. and Mme. Her-
vart. On February 16, 1695 La Fontaine wrote to Maucroix: "I assure you that your best friend can count on but two weeks at the most to live." He lingered on, weak in body but young in mind, till his death on April 13, 1695 in his seventy-fourth year. His sentiments at death were truly Christian. He had found again the peace and strength that his religion had given him in his early years.

Simple, honest, lovable, a genius, such was La Fontaine. Confessing himself and as much of humanity that came within his reach, he speaks to all the world. He is loved, laughed at and with. His place in literary history is unique, for he stands between the old and the new. He learned the order of the age of Louis XIV without losing the freedom and humor of the French of the Renaissance. We close as we began by saying that no poet has been better liked than he. Why? Let's listen to John C. Bailey:

And yet, if you ask what makes everyone so fond of him, I can hardly say; not his virtues, certainly, for of them he had no superfluous store; there is not much in his life that we can grow enthusiastic about, and some things, I am afraid, which one had better leave alone. He is anything but a hero, and if I were pressed to say why we almost love him, I could only fall back on my first answer and say for his charm.

CHAPTER TWO

La Fontaine expressly wished to give us lessons of conduct or morals when he wrote his Fables. Sometimes he expresses the moral very precisely; again, he has it run through the whole story as an unmistakable undercurrent without expressing it openly. Are the morals that he teaches Catholic or not? They are Catholic if they conform to the principles of Catholic morality. The question then arises what is Catholic morality? Catholic morality is the relation of the human with the divine law manifested by reason.¹ But here in these pages I do not wish to treat of morality as a science. The dominant idea is to see if the moral lessons taught by La Fontaine may be used as rules of life for a Christian. The answer will be yes or no according as the moral lessons agree or disagree with Catholic morality.

What are these rules of Catholic morality? An act is good or bad if it is in agreement with the eternal law manifested by reason, or more than that, if it is in accord with the principles of the Gospel which are the practical rules the best of Moralists, Christ, has given us. These evangelical rules are necessary because man cannot know all of his duties by reason alone. Revelation must come to his aid. For instance, man by reason alone can know that to blaspheme God is intrinsically wrong. But how can he know that he

must love his neighbor as himself? For that the teaching of Christ is necessary.

Therefore, the barometer which I will use to determine the conformity or non-conformity of the moral lessons taught by La Fontaine in his Fables will be: (1) Reason in agreement with the eternal law; (2) The decalogue, because it is a resume of natural and divine law; (3) The counsels, the precepts or, in a word, the teaching of Christ in the New Testament.

This study of the moral lessons of La Fontaine supposes that such moral lessons exist. By the very fact that La Fontaine employed the fable as a medium of poetic expression it follows that he likewise employs a moral. The fable and its moral are inseparable.

Let us see what the author of the Fable says of his moral: "You are at that age when amusement and games are permitted to princes; but at the same time you ought to give some of your thoughts to serious reflections. All this can be found in the fables... They seem puerile, I admit; but this outward appearance of puerility serves as an envelope for important truths." Thus the author says plainly that his Fables are not intended merely to give pleasure, but also to teach a lesson hidden in an envelope that we are to open and read. It is trite but true that one must penetrate into the center of the bone to reach the marrow.

In another citation we find La Fontaine telling us the same thing: that

2 "Epitre Déditaire" to the Dauphin.
his Fables are more than a simple recital.

Les fables ne sont pas ce qu'elles semblent être;
Le plus simple animal nous y tient lieu de maître.
Une morale nue apporte de l'ennui.
Le conte fait passer le précepte avec lui.
En ces sortes de feinte il faut instruire et plaire,
Et conter pour conter ne semble peu d'affaire.3

Undoubtedly La Fontaine has taken care to develop his ideas on the moral lesson and to make known his end. He preaches a moral, and sums it up thus:

Comme la force est un point
Dont je ne me pique point,
Je tâche d'y tourner le vice en ridicule,
Ne pouvant l'attaquer avec les bras d'Hercule.
C'est là tout mon talent; je ne sais s'il suffit.
Tantôt je peins en un récit
La sotte vanité jointe avec l'envie,
Deux pivots sur desquels roule aujourd'hui notre vie.
Tel est ce chétif animal
Qui voulut en grosseur, au boeuf se rendre égal.4

J'oppose quelquefois par une double image
Le vice à la vertu, la sottise au bon sens,
Les agneaux aux loups ravissants,
La mouche à la fourmi, faisant de cet ouvrage
Une ample comédie à cent actes divers
Et dont la scène est l'univers.
Hommes, dieux, animaux, tout y fait quelque rôle.5

There is then a moral in the Fables of La Fontaine. Here I do not say that this moral is good or bad. I have only tried to prove by the words of the author himself that it does exist. For there are some who say that the Fables of La Fontaine are neither moral nor immoral; they are amoral. Accord-

3"Le Pâtre et le Lion," livre VI, 1.
4"La Grenouille qui veut se faire aussi grosse que le Boeuf", livre I, 3.
5"Le Bûcheron et Mercure," livre V, 1.
ing to them, La Fontaine is a moralist who doesn't moralize. I hope that the quotations given above prove that opinion false. I do not say that La Fontaine gives a moral code in the sense that each Fable contains a negative or positive precept of morality. No. I simply say that the Fables contain a moral that when one reads them one is lead to that which is good or bad. Strictly speaking an indifferent thing exists. But when man uses it he changes it and it is no longer indifferent. It becomes either good or bad. We cannot agree with those who say that his fables are amoral. They separate the fable from its soul, the moral, and having done that say: "Admire this dead fable. Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it vital?" I wonder if these same people would have us separate the body from its soul and say: "Here is a beautiful corpse. See how full of life it is. Why, the soul isn't necessary for man's beauty nor for his activity!" We know that the body without the soul is a horrible thing that makes mortals shudder. The fable which contains no moral is likewise a monstrosity which inspires a literary horror.

But before deciding whether or not the Fables of La Fontaine contain a Catholic morality or not, let us see what some of his critics have thought of their usefulness as a moral lesson.
CHAPTER THREE

The opinion of critics concerning the morality in the Fables of La Fontaine is divided. Some find nothing but evil in his Fables; others, nothing but good; still others who discern both good and bad.

Among those who are most opposed to the Fables morally speaking are Alphonse de Lamartine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Lamartine severely condemns the Fables as unfit for the minds and hearts of youth. At the age of ten he had to learn some of the Fables by heart. He writes in the preface to his Méditations Poétiques that "c'est (la philosophie) du fiel, ce n'est pas du lait pour les lèvres et pour les coeurs de cet âge... Ce livre me répugnait, je ne savais pas pourquoi. Je l'ai su depuis: c'est qu'il n'est pas bon."¹ He assigns as reason for the lack of inherent goodness in the book, the total lack of virtue in the life of the author. "Comment le livre serait-il bon? l'homme ne l'était pas."²

Further on in his preface he condemns the whole French nation for putting such a work as the Fables into the hands of its youth. "Que penser d'une nation qui commence l'éducation de ses enfants par les leçons d'un cynique?"³

Certainly this view of the moral value of La Fontaine and his Fables is

¹Méditations Poétiques, A. de Lamartine, p. 6.
³Méditations Poétiques, A. de Lamartine, p. 6.

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a very pessimistic and "de parti-pris."

The second most famous severe critic of the Fables is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. On this subject Rousseau is of the opinion that the Fables are not understood by the young, and if they are it is so much the worse for them. Why? Because the Fables would lead them more to the practice of vice than of virtue. Writes Jean-Jacques in *Emile*: "Les Fables peuvent instruire les hommes; mais il faut dire la vérité aux enfants; sitôt qu'on la couvre d'un voile, ils ne se donnent plus la peine de le lever. On fait apprendre les Fables de La Fontaine à tous les enfants, et il n’y a pas un seul qui les entende. Quand ils les entendraient, ce serait encore pis, car la morale est tellement mêlée et si disproportionnée à leur âge qu’elle les porterait plus au vice qu’à la vertu." ⁴

Thus Rousseau's main objection is that the Fables are unsuited to the mental capacity of the child. The moral is "tellement disproportionnée à leur âge" that it cannot but produce an evil effect.

Rousseau's criticism, though severe, does not seem to be so universal and final as Lamartine's. Jean-Jacques seems to admit that the Fables are suited to men of mature judgement while Lamartine is apparently against the Fables "not of themselves" but because of the life of the man who wrote them.

Be that as it may, both are united on one point; the Fables should not be put in the hands of the young. They arrive at the conclusion by different

routes but are firm in their conviction. The one, Lamartine, attributes the lack of morality mainly to the character of the author and his cynical philosophy; the other, Rousseau, objects to the unsuitability of the level of the Fables.

Lamartine's judgment is valueless because of two things; first, he bases it on a prejudice of youth; second, he assumes that a man who is morally no good, must necessarily write works that are morally of no value. His objection based on the prejudice of youth is worthy of a refutation. Certainly his second objection cannot hold much weight with a thoughtful person. Suppose we admit that the life of La Fontaine was wanting in virtue. Even then the statement that "l'homme n'était pas bon" is too sweeping to carry much point. A morally deficient person may write things that had better been left unwritten. But the point is he doesn't have to. He may realize his own weaknesses and strive to produce a work to make up for those very weaknesses. No one will deny that Poe was no paragon of virtue. Should anyone then condemn his Raven or Bells because of his private life? Heinrich Heine, the German poet, did not lead a completely exemplary life. Yet, who would condemn his beautiful poem, "Du Bist Wie Eine Blume" because of his private failings? And did not Augustine become a saint? Once more the point is the writings do not of necessity conform to the character of the author. True, no one will deny that the Contes of La Fontaine should not be read. Brunetière suggests that if a literary motive requires one to keep them in his home they should be under lock and key. But he doesn't even sug-
gest that the Fables be dealt with in like manner.

I wonder if Lamartine would approve of the following: My (Lamartine's) life is good. Therefore, all of my works are morally good. Would that give anyone a sufficient reason to read his Jocelyn or his Voyages en Orient?

Possibly the best refutation we have for Rousseau is that that gentleman was a notoriously poor judge of things moral. In the same work in which he condemns the Fables, Rousseau states: "Sitôt l'éducation est un art, il est presque impossible qu'elle réussisse. Pour former cet homme rare, qu'avons-nous à faire? Beaucoup sans doute. C'est d'empêcher que rien ne soit fait?"5

"According to this theory," says Le Broc, "the best educated children are those who have not been educated at all."6 Certainly this theory agrees with Rousseau's idea that everything coming from the hands of the author of all things is good; everything degenerates in the hands of man. Experience and the teaching of the Church both deny and contradict his view.

Rousseau's objection that the child will be the dupe of fiction is best refuted by a quotation from Le Broc: "L'enfant en saurait être dupe de la fiction qui sert non à lui enseigner le mensonge, mais à faire pénétrer dans son esprit des vérités morales."7

Vicomte de Broc, it may be seen, considers the moral in the Fables entirely good. Nowhere in his study of La Fontaine Moraliste does he hint at

5Emile, livre II.
6La Fontaine Moraliste, Vicomte de Broc, p. 83.
7Ibid., p. 84.
anything that would detract from the moral standard of the Fables. In one of his chapters he opens with the statement that the best way to refute the adverse critics of La Fontaine is to assert the fact that the Fables are given to the young. To him this evidence of the confidence of the people of the nation is an overwhelming argument for the good morality of the Fables.

That refutation would hold equally well for Remy de Gourmont. M. de Gourmont, a writer of so-called modern biography, a disciple of Nietzsche, a fanatic who dogmatizes the servile dogmatism of tradition, has written a treatise on La Fontaine which originally appeared in the Mercure de France.

Gourmont's opinion of the morality of the Fables is, like that of Lamartine and Rousseau, a very poor one. He agrees with Lamartine that if children understood the moral lessons of the Fables they would be harmed by them. He further states that there is no Christian idea in the morality of the fables at all.

He claims that the gist of the moral teaching of the Fables is that it teaches one to avoid duty. With one sweeping sentence he brushes aside an unquoted commentator who claims that the morality of the Fables may be stated under three divisions: duties toward ourselves; duties towards others; duties towards God. "Cela serait difficile, puisque l'idée de devoir, sauf en quelques lieux communs, est absente des Fables." And he adds that if the morality of the Fables be joined to that of the Contes, one would obtain

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8Promenades Littéraires, Remy de Gourmont, p. 225.
9Ibid., p. 226.
10Ibid., p. 225.
"un assez curieux petit manuel de découragement de scepticisme, d'ironie, de naïveté, et de contradiction." How different is Gourmont's opinion from that of men such as Lafenestre, Faguet, Sainte-Beuve, de Broc, Hallays, Saint-Marc Girardin, Albert Peyre!

Peyre in his Du Prestige de la Pensee tells us: "Quant au point de vue moral, chaque fable recèle une leçon: et c'est du dialogue des animaux que sortent toujours des enseignements que nous donne La Fontaine. Il nous apprend l'art de conduire notre vie selon les règles de la prudence et de la sagesse."

Georges Lafenestre after expressing the regret that La Fontaine doesn't soar higher in his morality says: "on doit reconnaître néanmoins, que, pour la moyenne des intelligences, ces récits amusants et instructifs leur offrent, sous une forme attrayante, une somme énorme d'impressions délicates, de sentiments justes, d'observations exactes, de réflexions utiles, d'émotions poétiques, qu'elles acceptent sans résistance, dont elles restent pénétrées.

L'influence des Fables n'est donc ni mauvaise, ni pernicieuse, comme l'ont déclarée, avec quelque hauteur méprisante, Jean-Jacques et Lamartine.

Nous avons vu, par l'analyse de la morale qu'elles contiennent, que la lecture et l'étude en sont utiles à ceux qui ne savent point, consolantes pour ceux qui savent, agréables et fructueuses pour tous. . . Néanmoins, il serait injuste de reconnaître que, par les maximes populaires qu'il a répandues sur l'égalité des hommes, sur l'injustice des grands, sur la vanité des
grandeurs, sur la puissance des humbles, sur les joies de l'indépendance, sur
la solidarité des misérables, sur les plaisirs de la nature, il a exercé, sur
le mouvement des esprits au XVIIIᵉ siècle, une action latente et peu bruyante,
mais continue et profonde."\(^{13}\)

Saint-Marc Girardin, member of the French Academy, lays great stress on
the general ideas that the reading of the Fables suggests. He admits that
the Fables can and do amuse but hastens to add that if their sole value lay
in their power of amusement they would soon tire the reader. Their real
worth lies in the moral they teach or suggest. By moral he does not simply
mean the conclusion that La Fontaine states or implies in each fable, but
rather the general ideas that come to the mind of the intelligent reader.
"On croit que les Fables de la Fontaine plaisent surtout par le charme du
récit; si elles n'avaient que ce mérite, elles ne plairaient pas longtemps,
... Les fables de la Fontaine plaisent aussi par leur morale; mais notez
que je n'entends pas seulement par morale l'affabulation ou la conclusion qui
termine la fable. J'entends par morale les idées générales que suggère la
lecture des fables de la Fontaine."\(^{14}\) Then with skill and charm he shows how
the fable _La Cigale et la Fourmi_ can teach the mediocre lesson of frugality
or the more sublime one of laying up treasures in heaven, a kind of spiritual
frugality. He tells us his whole purpose of this lengthy analysis of the
moral of this particular fable. It is "pour montrer quelle abondance d'idées
générales il y a dans les fables même les plus simples. On peut en tirer à

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\(^{13}\)_La Fontaine, Georges Lafenestre_, p. 202-203.

\(^{14}\)_La Fontaine et les Fabulistes_, Saint-Marc Girardin, tome 1.
volonté une moralité familière et médiocre, ou élevée et généreuse. Elles ont de quoi répondre à toutes les questions aux petites comme aux grandes: tout dépend du questionneur."15

H. Taine has given us a very complete analysis of the Fables of La Fontaine. Knowing Taine, we can well imagine that he has laid no great stress on the moral value of the Fables. Rather he leans to the side of those who assign to the Fables an absence of morality. In his mind they are amoral and it is well that they are so. "Il n'a pas pris pour héros, comme Phèdre ou Esope, des êtres abstraits qui ne sont d'aucun temps et d'aucun lieu, sortes de portevois chargés de publier une morale. Il a été de son temps, il a peint les hommes qui l'entouraient tels qu'ils étaient."16 He states his idea again in slightly different form when he says, "c'est un monde avec un jugement sur le monde, que La Fontaine nous a donnés."17 It is a very mediocre morality. "Tâchez de n'être point sot, de connaître la vie, de n'être point dupe d'autrui ni de vous-même, voilà, je crois, l'abrégé de ses conseils. Il ne nous propose point de règle bien stricte, ni de but bien haut."18 How true is Saint-Marc Girardin's remark quoted above that the Fables have an answer to every question but much depends on him who questions.

I think it fitting to conclude these opinions of critics with what Emile Faguet says in his treatise on La Fontaine. Faguet's work incidentally, treats La Fontaine with a marked degree of justice. He respects the bonhomme,

15La Fontaine et les Fabulistes, Saint-Marc Girardin, tome 1, p. 408.
16La Fontaine, H. Taine, p. 157-158.
17Ibid., p. 161.
18Ibid., p. 61.
treats him with reverence. In short, he writes of the La Fontaine that the French nation knows and loves. But two quotations from Faguet will suffice to prove to us his love for him. "Une vie de prudence, de réflexion, de sage réserve à l'égard des grands, de modéstie, d'économie, de patience, de travail, de concorde et de mutuelle bienfaisance, voilà donc ce que le fabuliste recommande au pauvre et au faible pour qu'il puisse porter sans trop d'encombre la lourde charge que l'existence est pour lui. Graves et virils conseils, voilés le plus souvent d'un air charmant de bonne humeur et de gaieté, revêtus de toutes les grâces d'un récit plaisant et de remarques piquantes; mais si sérieux au fond, si importants, si salutaires, si propres à faire une belle et bonne nation de travailleurs probes, fiers et doux."19

Quite different is it not from the "manuel de découragement et de scepticisme" as Remy de Gourmont maintains the Fables to be? The second quotation deals with a world, a perfect world, that can be fashioned by men if they will but put into practice the teachings of La Fontaine. ". . . un monde où les petits sont heureux parce qu'ils sont devenus sages, prudents, laborieux, économiques, charitables, et se soutenant les uns les autres; un monde où l'on travaille librement et volontairement par gout du travail lui-même et de la dignité qu'il comporte; . . . un monde où l'on s'aime; un monde de concorde, de paix, de plaisirs simples, de médiocrité resignée et heureuse; un monde aussi d'innocente malice, de gaieté saine, de joyeux propos, de satire légère et sans amertume; un monde de bons travailleurs, simples de coeur, fins

19 La Fontaine, Emile Faguet, p. 178-179.
d'esprit, prompts au bienfait, à la reconnaissance, à la riposte aussi et à la bonne plaisanterie ragaillardissante; un monde enfin où toutes les forces saines de l'homme ont leur libre et pleine allure, leur franche saillie, et qui n'a pas de place pour la sottise, la vanité, l'ambition folle, la haine, l'ennui.

"Ce monde, que La Fontaine a rêvé, n'existe pas. Mais, par ses leçons, il a contribué, sans effort, sans éclats, sans paroles retentissantes et sans ambitieuses attitudes, mais tout autant et plus que bien d'autres, à créer quelque chose qui s'en rapproche. Il depend de nous, pénétrés de sa bonne pensée, de sa douce chaleur de coeur, de réaliser un peu tous les jours un peu plus, le rêve de notre cher poète."20

Beyond a shadow of a doubt Faguet sides with those who see nothing but good in the Fables of La Fontaine.

20La Fontaine, Emile Faguet, pp. 227-228.
CHAPTER FOUR

We have seen the morality of the Fables of La Fontaine severely blamed on the one hand and highly praised on the other. That some should censure, others eulogise is due to the fact that the fabulist himself is rarely dogmatic. He states things as he sees them and frequently does not decide. The decision, at least the final one, is often left to the reader. Like all things then that are open to private interpretation, his Fables are frequently misinterpreted.

The question then arises: Just what is the morality of the Fables of La Fontaine? For answer let us turn to their author. In his "Epitre Dedicatoire" he lays great stress on the moral value of his Fables. He admits that he has borrowed the idea of the fables from Esopo. The reading of Esopo, he claims, insensibly instills the seeds of virtue. The evident conclusion of his thought, although he does not state it in so many words, is that his Fables would have the same effect on the future king. The Dauphin is advised that he will find in the Fables amusement and serious reflections. Just what the nature of the serious reflections is La Fontaine does not say. But he deems them fit and proper for the instruction and education of him who one day is to rule the destinies of the nation.

1"Epitre Dedicatoire," Fables.
In the preface to the first edition of his Fables La Fontaine returns to the same points he made in his letter to the Dauphin. He asks the question, What is more suitable than the apologue to express the best thoughts of the mind? He reminds the reader that Plato banished Homer from his Republic to give a place to Esope. Plato desired that the children of his Republic learn the fables of Esope at the same time when they were being nourished with the milk of life. So, too, he intends that his Fables be inculcated into the minds of the young. If children, he argues, are told that an ox and a fox together descend into a well to quench their thirst, and the ox, because he lacks foresight, is caught there and has to remain because the fox is more clever than he, they will readily see that in all things the end must be considered. It will be noted that La Fontaine says that "in all things" the end must be considered. Indeed, such a lesson, such a moral, is unlimited in application.

Further in his preface he says that his Fables are trifling in appearance only and that fundamentally they contain good common sense. "Ces badineries ne sont telles qu'en apparence; car dans le fond elles portent un sens très-solide. Et comme, par la définition du point, de la ligne, de la surface, et par d'autres principes très-familiers, nous parvenons à des connaissances qui mesurent enfin le ciel et la terre, de même aussi, par les raisonnements et conséquences que l'on peut tirer de ces fables, on se forme

2"Préface," La Fontaine.
3Ibid.
4Ibid.
Once more we find La Fontaine expecting great things, the formation of judgment and morals, the performance of things grand and noble, from the morality he wishes to instill by his Fables. One more, too, La Fontaine fails to tell us just precisely what that morality is. For him it is enough that he hope it produce good results.

Instruction, no matter who or what we may be, is another avowed purpose of La Fontaine's.

"Tout parle en mon ouvrage, et même les poissons: Ce qu'ils disent s'adresse à tous tant que nous sommes; Je me sers d'animaux pour instruire les hommes."

In just what things we are instructed by the Fabulist we must read his works to find out.

It is in Livre V, Fable 1, that La Fontaine most clearly tells us just what he tries to do in his fables. Knowing that man does not always react favorably to reformers, he does not attack vice openly but tries rather to turn it into ridicule. All self reformation, at least all worth while reformation, must come from within. No amount of preaching can of itself make a man good. It is an all too common trait of humanity that most people resent any direct attempt at reformation. If they can be told their faults in such a way that they think that it is they themselves who discover them, the chances for improvement are better than any attempt at forcible reformation.

6 A Monseigneur le Dauphin.
La Fontaine realized this. That is why he sometimes paints vanity joined with envy, as in the case of the frog that wanted to make itself equal to the ox in size, so that man might see that vanity and envy are very foolish vices and thus avoid them. La Fontaine is careful to state here that he doesn't know if such a method is perfectly suited to actually reform man or keep him from falling into the mistake he ridicules. He is wise enough to know that man frequently does things that his reason tells him are stupid, foolish, and beneath his dignity. Yet, like all moralists he hopes that the effect he wants to produce will be produced. That is why with the universe as stage, men, gods, animals as actors, he has written for our instruction a comedy with a hundred different acts composed of scenes that contrast vice with virtue, stupidity with common sense, lambs with ravaging wolves, the fly with the ant.

We may conclude from all this that La Fontaine has a high opinion of the moral worth of his fables. He doesn't claim that their morality is natural, Christian, or Catholic. But if he doesn't claim natural, Christian, or Catholic morality he doesn't either deny that it is any one of the three or that it is a combination of all three.

To get a more complete picture of the nature of the morality of the Fables let us turn to the Fables themselves. This part of the chapter will deal with the morality of the Fables as a whole rather than with each fable in particular, even though specific fables may be quoted or used to state the morality in general.
To begin with, to determine the morality of the Fables using the Fables themselves depends almost entirely on the person who reads them. The general ideas, the particular lessons that La Fontaine's Fables arouse in the mind of the reader can be truly noble or merely mediocre depending on what one wishes to find. This point in our mind is an important one. True, in some cases, not even the best-disposed reader can extract a noble morality. But these spots are by far less common than those which admit of better interpretation.

One must accept the world as it is, things as they are. Be neither victims nor dupes of others, but don't try to reform mankind. This isn't a perfect world so accept the bitter with the sweet. Such is the practical natural philosophy La Fontaine gives us. The strong often oppress the weak. Not that La Fontaine wants it that way but that, unfortunately, is often the case. La Fontaine points out the abuses of power, the miseries and sufferings of the humble, the evils which result from social and political injustice. He cries out against these evils but in such a way that he censures while laughing.

With him the lion is the symbol of force and domination. He shows us that the lion sometimes abuses his power and that it is good for the weak to pay their humble respects lest they feel the cruelty of his claws. He de- plores the consequences of such an abuse claiming that it gives rise to a race of people who use lying and deceit, the only barriers that can be raised against such tyranny, to further their own ends. And yet even the
lion needs the lowly rat to save him. So why shouldn't men realize their dependance on each other and live in harmony?

The fox personifies cunning. La Fontaine shows how he deceives and lays snares, how he escapes from difficulties by playing on the credulity of others. And yet this same fox is in turn deceived by the stork, the rooster, and even loses his tail in a trap and is laughed to scorn by his brethren. Thus does La Fontaine depict those who live by cunning. They may succeed for a time but sooner or later their real nature is revealed and they fail.

The same is true of the cat. With La Fontaine the cat is a symbol of hypocrisy. The manner in which he describes the sneaking, treacherous qualities of the cat inspires one with an intense aversion for what it symbolizes. Even the hypocritical cat is deceived, and, at that, by a monkey. Yes, prudence is the quality that overcomes deceit.

The wolf, lacking the astuteness of the fox and the hypocrisy of the cat is an openly evil character. Hence he is more easily avoided. He is unable to deceive the sheep; disguised as a doctor, he is easily recognized by the horse who promptly kicks him. La Fontaine succeeds in painting him as leading a vagabond life guided only by his evil instincts and never happy. Indeed, there is no happiness for those who use their liberty only to do evil.

Further we are instructed to avoid the wicked who, if we associate with them and tolerate them, only repay us by abuse and by taking away what is ours. Such was the lot of the hound who sheltered her companion, the pigeons.
who tried to bring about a pact of peace with the warring kites.

La Fontaine likewise teaches that this world is governed by a wise Providence. Man shouldn't try to penetrate the secrets of the Infinite nor should he criticize a Providence that is wiser than he.

Although La Fontaine criticises the abuse of power he is not the enemy of authority. _Les Membres et l'Estomac_ defends it. Nor does he prefer one government to another. All have their good points and must be used to further the betterment of mankind.

Friendship, so highly praised by Holy Scripture, by the poets and sages of all times, is equally lauded by La Fontaine. He depicts with almost a caressing touch the sterling advantages of a friend and the joys of true friendship.

That all men must die, that men should be prepared for death are commonplace truths. Yet, La Fontaine treats them in no uncommon manner. If we are inclined to smile at La Fontaine's treatment of the subject of death, the lessons he advocates are none the less effective.

There always have been men who are discontented with their lot, men who are never satisfied with the good they have. La Fontaine humorously points out the vanity of their childish murmurings. He seems to say that happiness is not to be found on the road of murmuring, discontent, and vain longings. Similarly, he shows the emptiness of so-called glory, fame, and riches. Yes, in the Fables man is not spared because of his faults. Yet, if he is not spared, neither is he made hopeless. The Fables uplift, they
do not plunge one into despondency.

Thus in the Fables of La Fontaine we see justice loved, the abuse of power condemned; love of work, principles of economy instilled; vanity with all its foolishness ridiculed; foolish ambition, double dealing despised. Flee vanity, shun excessive riches, be content with your lot, be prepared for death—sane and wise precepts that echo on one's mind when one reads the Fables.

Truly, the Fables of La Fontaine are a book whose every page shows us man with his virtues and faults. The animals amuse, charm, instruct, and talk to us. We cannot help but smile at what they do and say, even though their every word and action is an arrow whose sharp point pricks our vanity, wounds our self-love, tears open and reveals our most secret failings. One can truthfully say that La Fontaine accomplished what he set out to do: to amuse and instruct man.
CHAPTER FIVE

If we consider that La Fontaine was born and reared a Catholic, that he lived in an era that was predominantly Catholic, we must admit that his thoughts, his mental equipment were imbued with Catholicity. Even if his life was not as it should have been, even if he was so close to Catholicity, so secure in it, that at times he forgot it, it is none the less true that he was Catholic. Hence, one can expect to find evidence of his background in his writings.

Again, La Fontaine has written to instruct us by amusing us. This means that he has written as a wit. His pithy, witty remarks are just sufficient to stimulate thought, to poke fun at man's foibles. They are profound but brief commentaries on life. And there lies the danger of the Fables--one must penetrate to the author's meaning. Sometimes that meaning is clear and obvious. Again it is hidden. Thus La Fontaine is frequently misinterpreted. The only one who could have treated the Fables without fear of being misinterpreted is the Divine Wit, Christ.

With these thoughts in mind we shall examine the general morality of the Fables.

It has been stated that La Fontaine tells us we must accept the world as it is, things as they are. Couldn't that mean that he wants us to accept everything in this world as coming from God? In other words there is a
Providence that sends us good and evil. Accept what it sends. The same thought is expressed in Ecclesiasticus: "Good things and evil, life and death, poverty and riches are from God."¹ La Fontaine simply tells us to accept things. He doesn't take the last step and tell us to accept them as coming from God. But what proof is there that he didn't have that in mind? And what objection is there so to interpret his meaning?

Another of his oft repeated lessons is: Do not be the dupes and victims of others. A wise and prudent counsel that we find stated plainly in the New Testament. "Be ye simple as doves and wise as serpents."²

Likewise, Christ warned the Jews against the false leadership of the Pharisees, and thus against the general fault of following any leader blindly. Man is equipped with intelligence. It is not against Catholic teaching to use that intelligence in following leaders or to recognize and penetrate the deceit of others. When Christ told us to beware of false prophets, he taught the same lesson often repeated by La Fontaine. And is not the poet's advice a far off echo of what the Holy Ghost tells us in Proverbs? "O little ones, understand subtilty."³

La Fontaine has likewise pointed out that the strong often oppress the weak. Christ points out the same when He tells us that "if a strong man armed keepeth his court, those things are in peace which he possesseth. But if a stronger than he come upon him; he will take away all his armour wherein

¹Ecclesiasticus XI, 14.
²Matthew X, 16.
³Proverbs VIII, 5.
he trusted and will distribute his spoils." Sad but true. History has testified to the truth of Christ's observation. That La Fontaine has reiterated it is to his credit.

If La Fontaine has depicted the lion as a symbol of power or brute force which sometimes misuses or abuses his power, he does not advocate such conduct for men. Rather with Catholic morality he shows that they who live by the sword perish by it. All the animals that depict vices and faults in the Fables are eventually punished or caught in their own snares. Cunning, double-dealing, hypocrisy, so strongly condemned by Christ in the New Testament, are roundly, even if humorously, censured in the Fables.

The method that Christ uses to warn us against defects does not parallel that of La Fontaine. Christ is positive, precise, powerful in his censure; La Fontaine is non-committal, suggestive, witty. True, both use similes, parables. But La Fontaine never reaches the precise dogmatic statements that Christ made. Of course we don't expect him to. Christ is God-Man; La Fontaine is mere man. But the fabulist has written much that supports or agrees with the New Testament. The virulent condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees has its remote echo in La Fontaine's portrayal of the cat. The wolf in sheep's clothing has his understudy La Fontaine's wolf. La Fontaine's statement that we have a front pocket for the faults of others and a back one for our own, is only another way of saying, "Why dost thou see the moat in thy brother's eye, and not the beam in thine own."

Christ has told us to avoid the company of heathens if they will not be converted. La Fontaine, by adroitly narrating the fable, "La Lice et sa Compagne," shows that association with the wicked harms the good.

La Fontaine's animals when wicked or evil are punished. Thus, the moral is saved and he bears out the words of Proverbs, "His own iniquities catch the wicked, and he is fast bound with the ropes of his own sins." 5

But not only is La Fontaine negative in his morality, he is also positive. His lessons on death are vivid, clear, convincing. That it is appointed unto men once to die is the predominant chord that is struck in each fable on death. Also his lessons on Providence strike a positive note. The moral of these fables is plainly that one is to be content with what God gives; to accept His decrees with submission. Certainly such lessons correspond to the teaching of Catholic morality.

La Fontaine has likewise shown that money cannot of itself bring happiness. If it causes unhappiness it is to be given up. That is a sage piece of advice. It is true, however, that La Fontaine again fails to give us a high motive, such as the gaining of the Kingdom of Heaven, to aid in the renunciation of wealth. But as far as his moral goes, it is sound in its principle of detachment.

Christ condemned the Pharisees for putting heavy burdens on the people, binding them with almost unsupportable yokes. La Fontaine severely criticises the courts of his day for not rendering justice to the poor and lowly.

5Proverbs V, 22.
There are Fables which point out no kind of Christian morality. These are mere observations on man and his folly. For instance, the fable of the mountain which was expected to bring forth a large city but emitted a mouse. The fabulist compares it with authors who talk much about what they are going to write and produce works far below what their own heralding of things great to come would suggest. Such fables have no counterpart of justification by Catholic morality. But they are not opposed to it. They are mere common sense dictums which man can use irrespective of things moral or immoral.

Occasionally there are sentences in La Fontaine which the author should either have explained or omitted altogether.

On ne peut trop louer trois sortes de personnes:
   Les Dieux, sa maîtresse, et son roi.6

Such a statement can be a source of wrong thinking and action to the untrained mind. The fable which follows the opening lines does not give the impression that one would expect from the introduction. Nevertheless, those lines cannot be accepted since they condone things contrary to Catholic morality.

Hence, in conclusion it may be said that La Fontaine for the most part is decidedly Catholic. Occasionally that Catholicity looms large and prominent in his Fables, again it merely underlies and gives them tone. There are some Fables that, because of their amoral nature, or, because of the purely natural viewpoint, are Catholic only in so far as they do not militate

6Fables, I, 14.
against Catholic morality. And, lastly, there are some few lines, which be-
cause of insufficient explanation, or obvious wrong meaning cannot lay
claim to kinship with Catholic morality.

But the greater part of the Fables is Catholic in viewpoint and teaching.
Because of the end La Fontaine had in view, because of his own shortcomings,
the minor details of a finished moral masterpiece are denied him. But
masterpiece none the less it is. A symphonic orchestra can produce a harmon-
ious rendition of a Beethoven sonata in spite of the fact that every musician
is not perfect. The Fables in general appear to be Catholic in their
morality even if a rare note of discord is sounded.

To bring out the Catholicity of the morality of La Fontaine by use of
particular examples will be the object of the next chapter.
CHAPTER SIX

La Cigale et La Fourmi

"Go to the ant, 0 sluggard, and consider her ways and learn wisdom."¹
Thus spoke Solomon. If La Fontaine was not trying to popularize that state­ment for the French, he succeeded in spite of himself. His "Cigale et Fourmi" paraphrases the proverb of the Old Testament. The cigale which sang all summer and neglected to store up provisions for winter is contrasted to the ant which has worked and by its industry has the wherewith to meet future hardships. Thus the fabulist at once praises industry and condemns sloth. Some think that the moral of this fable is spoiled by the ant's refusal to give to the cigale from its abundant store. It is pertinent here to bring in Christ's parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The foolish asked the wise for oil. But they received the common sense reply to go buy some lest there wouldn't be enough for all. While buying the oil, they missed the bridegroom and were prevented from entering into the feast. As the wise refused the foolish virgins, so the ant refused the cigale. La Fontaine's moral is sound and practical.

La Besace

It is a far too common trait of man to judge his neighbor, to consider

¹Proverbs VI, 6.
himself better than another. Likewise, man is prone to extenuate faults in himself and to magnify the faults of others. In the sermon on the mount Christ condemned man for this fault. Justly He rebuked those who see the mote in their brother's eye and not the beam in their own. The parable of the Pharisee and the publican\(^2\) condemns the Pharisee who saw nothing but good in himself and evil in the publican. La Fontaine in a humorous fable which he calls the "Wallet," gives sound advice and a healthy moral. Jupiter one day assembled everything that breathes in his presence and asked if anyone was dissatisfied. The monkey thought himself quite handsome but couldn't see the bear at all. The bear found nothing amiss in his bulky frame, but thought that the elephant's tail was too short, his ears too large. But the elephant extolled his own perfection. The only fault he had to find was that the goat's appetite was not in proportion to its size. The worst offender, that is, the one most satisfied with himself and inclined to criticise others, was man. Jupiter censured all and sent them away. The fabulist sagely remarks:

Nous nous pardonnons tout, et rien aux autres hommes:
On se voit d'un autre œil qu'on ne voit son prochain. . .
Il fit pour nos défauts la poche de derrière,
Et celle de devant pour les défauts d'autrui.\(^3\)

Le Renard et La Cicogne

To use deceit in dealings with fellow-men cannot bring about peace or

\(^3\)Fables I, 7.
happiness. Do unto others as we would have others do unto us is a principle that Christ laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, men do not always heed this counsel. La Fontaine shows that deceit in dealings with others may have a boomerang effect and catch the deceiver unawares much to his chagrin. Such was the lot of the fox who prepared a broth, served it in a shallow plate and invited the swan to partake of his meal. The swan could eat but a very small portion at a time because of its large beak and long neck. On the other hand the fox lapped up the broth with a few masterly strokes of his practiced tongue. Somewhat later, the swan invited the fox to a choice meal. Everything was prepared to suit the taste of the most epicurean of foxes. But the meal was served in vases, the long necks of which prevented the fox from getting anything but which were admirably suited to the beak and neck of the swan. "Trompeurs, c'est pour vous que j'écris," writes the moralist.

L'Enfant et Le Maitre d'Ecole

This fable applies, as La Fontaine says explicitly, to every vain babble, every one who censures, every pedant. He makes a common sense criticism of those who confuse the error and the person. While the error is being blamed, censured, the unfortunate school boy is left clinging to the branches of the willow. The obvious need of rescuing the lad is put second place to blaming him. Christ gave us no specific parable to apply here. But His conduct is in accordance with what the poet recommends. He cured first and then said, "Sin no more lest some worse thing happen to thee."
The meek, gentle, yet firm dealing with the woman taken in adultery amply bears out the soundness of La Fontaine's suggestion: "He, mon ami, tire-moi de danger, Tu feras après ta harangue."  

Le Chêne et Le Roseau

"He that thinketh himself to stand take heed lest he fall." Thus warns Scripture. Men who attribute greatness to themselves, who make themselves superior to others, who contemn others because of faults they possess, are afflicted with pride, a vice hateful to God and man.

The oak possesses all the characteristics of such a proud person. It contemns the reed, laughs at its size, its weakness, its lack of rigidity. But before the mighty wind which caught its immense trunk, leaves, and branches and tore it from its roots, the oak was as a toy. The reed merely bent before the fury of the storm and survived to witness the destruction of its contemner. The very security of the reed lay in the lack of those things of which the oak boasted. Pride, says the Scripture, goes before a fall. How admirably La Fontaine tells mankind that same lesson.

L'Astroloque Qui Se Laisse Tomber Dans Un Puits

The astrologer who fell into the well trying to read the stars serves as example of those who try to penetrate the secrets of Providence. "He that is a searcher of majesty shall be overwhelmed by glory," said Solomon. 5

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4 Fables I, 19.
5 Proverbs XXV, 27.
Fontaine humorously asks the astrologer, "Poor brute! since you can hardly see to your feet, do you think you can read that which is above you?" God does everything by design, argues the fabulist, and He alone knows the vastness, the perfection of His plans. It is not for a man to presume to be able to read God's mind, to fathom His intelligence. Man should accept what God sends and be content with his lot.

**Le Corbeau Voulant Imiter L'Aigle**

"L'exemple est un dangereux leurre" sang La Fontaine. To prove it he relates how the crow decided to carry off a prize sheep, having seen the eagle do it many times before. The crow overestimated his own strength, underestimated the weight of the sheep. Nor did he count on the matted condition of the sheep's wool. He could neither carry away the sheep nor escape himself and thus became the property of the shepherd who put him in a cage and gave him to his children. The example that the eagle gave the crow proved the latter's downfall. Christ has condemned and denounced the giver of bad example much more effectively. That such a one should be weighted down and cast into the sea are harsh words coming from the mouth of the Son of God. Yet, He uttered them. La Fontaine is not nearly so forceful but he does condemn the same thing, and, hence, conforms to Christ's teaching.

**Le Loup Devenu Berger**

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep,

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⁶Fables II, 13.
⁷Fables II, 13.
but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you shall know them.\(^8\)

A warning, and a sure way to judge individuals. False prophets, or deceivers, can always be judged from their works. A thing cannot change its nature. That which is evil is evil no matter how it is dressed. Christ knew it and told mankind. La Fontaine echoes it when he says, "Quiconque est loup agisse en loup."\(^9\) His wolf which dressed himself as a shepherd did well until he spoke. Naturally his voice couldn't be that of man since he wasn't a man. Hence, he betrayed himself and perished.

_Le Renard et Le Bouc_

Scripture advises that one consider his last end and he will never sin. La Fontaine refrains from mentioning sin but does tell us that the end of every action should be considered. Certainly his principle is a sound and prudent one. "En toute chose il faut considérer la fin,"\(^10\) conforms with logic and Catholic morality. It was to illustrate this maxim that La Fontaine wrote of the fox and the goat who both descended into the well to slake their thirst. They couldn't get out. The fox persuaded the goat to place its front paws high on the wall. Then the fox climbed out and preached an admirable sermon on patience and left the goat to his own stupid devices.

To weigh our actions, to see what effects they will have, to examine them in the light of reason is rational. Not to do this, in natural and supernatural

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\(^8\)Matthew VII, 15-16.
\(^9\)Fables III, 3.
\(^10\)Fables III, 5.
spheres, is foolish and harmful. Prudence is a moral virtue highly recommended by Catholic teaching.

L'Ivrogne et Sa Femme

To show the danger of frequent acts of sin, Christ spoke of the man out of whom the unclean spirit had gone. The man's soul was swept and garnished. The unclean spirit wandered about and not finding a place to rest decided to take seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and go back into the man he had left. The last state of that man was worse than the first, said Christ. Repetition of evil acts produces vice, the habit of evil. Unless one guards against evil in the beginning it hardens one, stifles conscience, and kills shame and fear.

La Fontaine is well aware of all that. By his odd story of the toper and his wife he clearly points out that shame, fear, punishment can be but slight deterrents to the habitually evil person. So much are they slaves to their fault, that even if they are "Citizens of hell," hopelessly lost, they would wish to continue their evil habits. L'Ivrogne in the fable, even though he thought himself dead and damned, preferred something to drink to something to eat.

Le Cygne et Le Cuisinier

Proverbs gives us the oft quoted maxim that "a mild answer breaketh wrath." A modified application but a true one is found in this fable. The

11Proverbs XVI, 1.
swan would have been killed and served with the other fowl had not its speech so impressed the Cuisinier. "Le doux parler ne nuit en rien." 12

Le Chat et Un Vieux Rat

This fable teaches caution, a form of prudence. To take risks spiritual or otherwise is presumptuous. There is much deceit in the world, many snares, and one must be on one's guard. Simple we have been enjoined to be; but, as was pointed out before, the next injunction was to be wise as serpents.

Certainly le vieux rat was wise. The cat could not fool him either by playing dead or by disguising itself with flour. He serves as a symbol of those who have profited by the scriptural injunction and do not allow themselves to be taken in by deceit. "La méfiance est mère de la sûreté." 13

La Grenouille et Le Rat

The frog who invited the rat to dine with him and who planned to drown and devour that rare bit of frog-delicacy, did not realize that his own plan would prove his downfall. The rat accepted the frog's invitation willingly, believing the opportunity all to his advantage. His fears of not being able to swim to the frog-domicile were efficiently allayed by the wily frog. The latter tied the rat's leg to his. Then he tried to drown the unsuspecting rat. A kite soaring high above in quest of a noon-day meal, saw the commotion

12Fables III, 12.
13Fables III, 18.
in the water, swooped down upon the rat, and carried both away. As La Fontaine says:

La Ruse la mieux ourdie
Peut nuire à son inventeur;
Et souvent la perfidie
Retourne sur son auteur.\textsuperscript{14}

Indeed the moral is the same as that which Proverbs teaches: "His own iniquities catch the wicked and he is fast bound with the ropes of his own sins."\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{L'Oracle et L'Impie}

A careful analysis of this fable shows a striking resemblance to the coin episode of the Gospel. Like the Pharisees who tried to catch Christ on the question, Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not? the "pâien" of the fable asks the oracle if what he has in his hand is dead or alive. If the oracle said, "Dead," he would show him the live sparrow. If he said "Alive," the pagan would strangle the sparrow and show it to him dead. Thus, he thought that he could trap the oracle and make him utter a false statement. But, "If it be dead or alive show me the sparrow and do not set any more traps for me" was the reply he received. La Fontaine thus shows that it is folly to tempt heaven. God knows our most secret actions and the motive for them.

"Tout ce que l'homme fait, il le fait à leurs yeux,
Même les actions que dans d'ombre il croit faire."\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14}Fables IV, 11.
\textsuperscript{15}Proverbs V, 22.
\textsuperscript{16}Fables IV, 19.
God is not mocked. It is of no avail to tempt Him. Moreover, it is blasphemous. Christ's words "Why do ye tempt me, ye hypocrites?" are severe and plainly show that such conduct is wrong. La Fontaine teaches the same thing and justifies his moral.

**Le Pot de Terre et Le Pot de Fer**

"What agreement shall the earthen pot have with the kettle? for if they knock one against the other it shall be broken." 17

The Holy Ghost puts those words in the mouth of the wise man to instruct man. When frail people mingle with the strong, they suffer. Likewise the good may be harmed by the bad. So, too, the lowly if they associate with the great are abused. La Fontaine instills the same things in the fable which seems borrowed directly from Ecclesiasticus. An iron pot asked an earthen one to accompany it on a journey. The earthen pot refused because it knew it was frail and easily broken. But, persuaded by the iron pot which promised to shield it from danger, it finally consented. Hardly had a few steps been taken when the iron pot bumped the earthen pot and shattered it. "Ne nous associons qu'avec ceux nos égaux" says the fabulist. By "égaux" could be meant not only equals in position or rank, but also equals in degree of virtue.

**Le Charlatan**

In this fable the poet advocates that one eat and drink well because one cannot count on ten years of life. Death in ten years takes one out of every

17 Ecclesiasticus XIII, 3.
three persons.

... C'est folie
De compter sur dix ans de vie.
Soyons bien buvants, bien mangeants
Nous devons à la mort de trois l'un en dix ans.18

His statement that one cannot count on ten years of life is trite but true, and is conformable to Catholic teaching. But his motive for not counting on those years and what he advocates to be done before death come is certainly not conformable to Catholic teaching. The charlatan is not justified in taking the money under false pretences even if death should overtake him, the one he fooled, or the donkey. No act in itself wrong can be justified. And that is just what La Fontaine implies. If La Fontaine had merely commented on the fact that charlatans do exist and had not used the imperative "soyons" he could be excused. But since he has worded his moral as he did, he must be condemned.

Le Curé et Le Mort

This fable, told with that sort of familiarity with religious things that a son of the eldest daughter of the Church might take, very humorously points out that death is no respecter of persons. It comes to all. "Notre curé suit son seigneur." Man is inclined to think that death is for everyone but himself, and plan and hope, not thinking that he will be next. Christ told us frequently that death will come as a thief in the night; that no one knows the day nor the hour of his death. Yet, as La Fontaine points out, the lesson is rarely applied to oneself. The curé, while walking beside the bier,

18 Fables VI, 19.
thinking of what he will be able to do with the stipend from the burial, was struck by death. A moral, at once practical and Catholic.

La Forêt et Le Bûcheron

In the parable of the ten lepers Christ pointed out quite plainly that He expects gratitude from man. Only one returned to thank Him for the cure. He expected ten. Men expect gratitude, much more so God. He who uses the gift to harm the benefactor is doubly guilty. Thus La Fontaine shows that the woodsman who begged the forest for an axe handle and then used that gift to destroy the forest is not only ungrateful, which is bad, but knowingly malicious, which is worse.

On s'y sert du bienfait contre les bienfaiteurs.
Hélas! J'ai beau crier et me rendre incommode,
L'ingratitude et les abus
N'en seront pas moins à la mode.19

That one is to be grateful and not abuse the gift of the benefactor is the very obvious Catholic moral.

Since so much Scripture has been used to prove that La Fontaine is Catholic in his morality, one more quotation is not out of place. "They have eyes and see not, ears and hear not." It is to be used here for those who have examined the Fables and still maintain that they are not predominantly Catholic in their morality.

Yes, La Fontaine, the "bonhomme," the dreamer, the poet, wanted to amuse and to instruct mankind. He has realized both of his objectives.

19 Livre 12, F. 16.
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The thesis, "The Morality of the Fables of La Fontaine", written by Brother Joseph Norbert Picraux, F.S.C., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Le Blanc  
November 19, 1940

Dr. May  
December 6, 1940