

. THE  
HUMOUR OF FRANCE .

SELECTED AND TRANSLATED,  
WITH INTRODUCTION AND  
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## VER-VERT.

"A PARROT LIVED AS PARLOUR-BOARDER."

**I**N old Nevers, so famous for its  
Dark narrow streets and Gothic turrets,  
Close on the brink of Loire's young flood,  
Flourished a convent sisterhood  
Of *Ursulines*. Now in this order  
A parrot lived as parlour-boarder;  
Brought in his childhood from the *Antilles*,  
And sheltered under convent mantles;  
Green were his feathers, green his pinions,  
And greener still were his opinions;

For vice had not yet sought to pervert  
 This bird, who had been christened Ver-Vert ;  
 Nor could the wicked world defile him,  
 Safe from its snares in this asylum.  
 Fresh, in his teens, frank, gay, loquacious ;  
 If we examine close, not one, or he,  
 Had a vocation for a nunnery.<sup>1</sup>

The convent's kindness need I mention ?  
 Need I detail each fond attention,  
 Or count the tit-bits which *in Lent* he  
 Swallowed remorseless and in plenty ?  
 Plump was his carcass ; no, not higher  
 Fed was their confessor the friar ;  
 And some even say that our young Hector  
 Was far more loved than the " Director " !<sup>2</sup>  
 Dear to each novice and each nun—  
 He was the soul of life and fun ;  
 Though, to be sure, some hags censorious  
 Would sometimes find him too uproarious.  
 What did the parrot care for those old  
 Dames, while he had for him the household ?  
 He had not yet made his " profession,"  
 Nor come to years called of " discretion " ;  
 Therefore, unblamed, he ogled, flirted,  
 And romped like any unconverted ;  
 Nay, sometimes, too, by the Lord Harry !  
 He'd pull their caps and " scapulary."  
 But what in all his tricks seemed oddest,  
 Was that at times he'd turn so modest,  
 That to all bystanders the wight  
 Appeared a finished hypocrite.

<sup>1</sup> " *Par son caquet digne d'être en couvent.*"

<sup>2</sup> " *Souvent l'oiseau l'emporta sur le Père.*"

Placed when at table near some vestal,  
 His fare, be sure, was of the best all,—  
 For every sister would endeavour  
 To keep for him some sweet *hors d'œuvre*.  
 Kindly at heart, in spite of vows and  
 Cloisters, a nun is worth a thousand !  
 And aye, if Heaven would only lend her,  
 I'd have a nun for a nurse tender !<sup>1</sup>

Then, when the shades of night would come on,  
 And to their cells the sisters summon,  
 Happy the favoured one whose grotto  
 This sultan of a bird would trot to :  
 Mostly the young ones' cells he toyed in  
 (The aged sisterhood avoiding),  
 Sure among all to find kind offices,—  
 Still he was partial to the novices,  
 And in *their* cells our anchorite  
 Mostly cast anchor for the night ;  
 Perched on the box that held the relics, he  
 Slept without notion of indelicacy.  
 Rare was his luck ; nor did he spoil it  
 By flying from the morning toilet ;  
 Not that I can admit the fitness  
 Of (at the toilet) a male witness ;  
 But that I scruple in this history  
 To shroud a single fact in mystery.

Quick at all arts, our bird was rich at  
 That best accomplishment, called chit-chat ;  
 For, though brought up within the cloister,  
 His beak was not closed like an oyster,

<sup>1</sup> "*Les petits soins, les attentions fines,  
 Sont nés, dit on, chez les Ursulines.*"

But, trippingly, without a stutter,  
 The longest sentences would utter;  
 Pious withal and moralising,  
 His conversation was surprising;  
 None of your equivoques, no slander—  
 To such vile tastes he scorned to pander;  
 But his tongue ran most smooth and nice on  
 "Deo sit laus" and "Kyrie eleison";  
 The maxims he gave with best emphasis  
 Were Suarez's or Thomas à Kempis's;  
 In Christmas carols he was famous,  
 "Orate, fratres," and "OREMUS";  
 Or, by particular desire, he  
 Would chant the hymn of "Dies iræ."  
 Then in the choir he would amaze all  
 By copying the tone so nasal  
 In which the sainted sisters chanted,—  
 (At least that pious nun my aunt did).

Fame, O Ver-Vert! in evil humour,  
 One day to Nantes had brought the rumour  
 Of thy accomplishments,—“acumen,”  
 “Nous,” and “esprit,” quite superhuman:  
 All these reports but served to enhance  
 Thy merits with the nuns of Nantes.  
 How did a matter so unsuited  
 For convent ears get hither bruited?  
 Some may inquire. But “nuns are knowing,”  
*And first to hear what gossip's going.*<sup>1</sup>  
 Forthwith they taxed their wits to elicit  
 From the famed bird a friendly visit.  
 Girls' wishes run in a brisk current,

<sup>1</sup> “*Les révérendes mères  
 A tout savoir ne sont pas les dernières.*”

But a nun's fancy is a torrent,<sup>1</sup>  
 To get this bird they'd pawn the missal :  
 Quick they indite a long epistle,  
 Careful with softest things to fill it,  
 And then with musk perfume the billet.

Off goes the post. When will the answer  
 Free them from doubt's corroding cancer?  
 Nothing can equal their anxiety,  
 Except, of course, their well-known piety.  
 Things at Nevers meantime went harder  
 Than well would suit such pious ardour ;  
 It was no easy job to coax  
 This parrot from the Nevers folks.

*En ce tems là*, a small canal boat,  
 Called by most chroniclers the "Talbot,"  
 (TALBOT, a name well known in France !)  
 Travelled between Nevers and Nantes.  
 Ver-Vert took shipping in this craft,  
 'Tis not said whether fore or aft ;  
 But in a book as old as Massinger's  
 We find a statement of the passengers ;  
 These were—two Gascons and a piper,  
 A sexton (a notorious swiper),  
 A brace of children and a nurse ;  
 But what was infinitely worse,  
 A dashing Cyprian ; while by her  
 Sat a most jolly-looking friar.

For a poor bird brought up in purity  
 'Twas a sad augur for futurity

<sup>1</sup> "*Désir de fille est un feu qui dévore,  
 Désir de nonne est cent fois pis encore.*"

To meet, just free from his indentures,  
 And in the first of his adventures,  
 Such company as formed his hansel,—  
 Two rogues! a friar!! and a damsel!!!  
 Birds the above were of a feather;  
 But to Ver-Vert 'twas altogether  
 Such a strange aggregate of scandals  
 As to be met but among Vandals;  
 Rude was their talk, bereft of polish,  
 And calculated to demolish  
 All the fine notions and good breeding  
 Taught by the nuns in their sweet Eden.  
 No Billingsgate surpassed the nurse's,  
 And all the rest indulged in curses;  
 Ear hath not heard such vulgar gab in  
 The nautic cell of any cabin.  
 Silent and sad, the pensive bird,  
 Shocked at their guilt, said not a word.

Now he "of orders grey," accosting  
 The parrot green, who seemed quite lost in  
 The contemplation of man's wickedness,  
 And the bright river's gliding liquidness,  
 "Tip us a stave (quoth Tuck), my darling;  
 Ain't you a parrot or a starling?  
 If you don't talk, by the holy poker,  
 I'll give that neck of yours a choker!"  
 Scared by this threat from his propriety,  
 Our pilgrim thinking with sobriety,  
 That if he did not speak they'd make him,  
 Answered the friar *PAX SIT TECUM!*  
 Here our reporter marks down after  
 Poll's maiden-speech—"loud roars of laughter;"  
 And sure enough the bird so affable,  
 Could hardly use a phrase more laughable.

Poll's brief address met lots of cavillers ;  
 Badgered by all his fellow-travellers,  
 He tried to mend a speech so ominous  
 By striking up with *Dixit Dominus!*  
 But louder shouts of laughter follow,—  
 This last roar beats the former hollow,  
 And shows that it was bad economy  
 To give a stave from Deuteronomy.

Posed, not abashed, the bird refused to  
 Indulge a scene he was not used to ;  
 And, pondering on his strange reception,  
 "There must," he thought, "be some deception  
 In the nuns' views of things rhetorical,  
 And Sister Rose is not an oracle.  
 True wit, perhaps, lies not in *mattins*,  
 Nor is *their* school a school of Athens."

Thus in this villainous receptacle  
 The simple bird at once grew sceptical.  
 Doubts lead to hell. The arch-deceiver  
 Soon made of Poll an unbeliever ;  
 And mixing thus in bad society,  
 He took French leave of all his piety.

His austere maxims soon he mollified,  
 And all his old opinions qualified ;  
 For he had learned to substitute  
 For pious lore things more astute ;  
 Nor was his conduct unimpeachable,  
 For youth, alas ! is but too teachable ;  
 And in the progress of his madness  
 Soon he had reached the depths of badness.



Such were his *curses*, such his evil  
 Practices, that no ancient devil,  
 Plunged to the chin when burning hot  
 Into a holy water-pot,  
 Could so blaspheme, or fire a volley  
 Of oaths so drear and melancholy.

Scarce in the port was this small craft  
 On its arrival telegraphed,  
 When, from the boat home to transfer him,  
 Came the nuns' portress, "Sister Jerome."  
 Well did the parrot recognise  
 The walk demure and downcast eyes ;  
 Nor aught such saintly guidance relished  
 A bird by worldly arts embellished ;  
 Such was his taste for profane gaiety,  
 He'd rather much go with the laity.  
 Fast to the bark he clung ; but plucked thence,  
 He showed dire symptoms of reluctance,  
 And, scandalising each beholder,  
 Bit the nun's cheek, and eke her shoulder !  
 Thus was Ver-Vert, heart-sick and weary,  
 Brought to the heavenly monastery.  
 The bell and tidings both were tolled,  
 And the nuns crowded, young and old,  
 To feast their eyes with joy uncommon on  
 This wondrous talkative phenomenon.

Round the bright stranger, so amazing  
 And so renowned, the sisters gazing,  
 Praised the green glow which a warm latitude  
 Gave to his neck, and liked his attitude.  
 Some by his gorgeous tail are smitten,  
 Some by his beak so beauteous bitten !

And none e'er dreamt of dole or harm in  
A bird so brilliant and so charming.

Meantime the abbess, to "draw out"  
A bird so modest and devout,  
With soothing air and tongue caressing,  
The "pilgrim of the Loire" addressing,  
Broached the most edifying topics  
To "start" this native of the tropics;  
When, to their scandal and amaze, he  
Broke forth—" *Morbleu!* those nuns are crazy!"  
(Showing how well he learnt his task on  
The packet-boat from that vile Gascon!)  
"Fie! brother poll!" with zeal outbursting,  
Exclaimed the abbess, dame Augustin;  
But all the lady's sage rebukes  
Brief answer got from poll—"Gadzooks!"  
Scared at the sound—"Sure as a gun,  
The bird's a demon!" cried the nun.  
"O the vile wretch! the naughty dog!  
He's surely *Lucifer incog.*  
What! is the reprobate before us  
That bird so pious and decorous—  
So celebrated?" Here the pilgrim,  
Hearing sufficient to bewilder him,  
Wound up the sermon of the beldame  
By a conclusion heard but seldom—  
"Ventre Saint Gris!" "Parbleu!" and "Sacre!"  
Three oaths, and every one a whacker!  
Stunned at these sounds of import stygian,  
The pious daughters of religion  
Fled from a scene so dread, so horrid,  
But with a cross first signed their forehead.  
The younger sisters, mild and meek,  
Thought that the culprit spoke in Greek;

But the old matrons and "the bench"  
 Knew every word was genuine French;  
 And ran in all directions, pell-mell,  
 From a flood fit to overwhelm hell.  
 'Twas by a fall that Mother Ruth  
 Then lost her last remaining tooth.  
 Straight in a cage the nuns insert  
 The guilty person of Ver-Vert.

Back to the convent of his youth,  
 Sojourn of innocence and truth,  
 Sails the green monster, scorned and hated,  
 His heart with vice contaminated.  
 Must I tell how, on his return,  
 He scandalised his own sojourn?  
 And how the guardians of his infancy  
 Wept o'er their quondam child's delinquency?  
 What could be done? The elders often  
 Met to consult how best to soften  
 This obdurate and hardened sinner,  
 Finished in vice ere a beginner!  
 One mother counselled "to denounce,  
 And let the Inquisition pounce  
 On the vile heretic;" another  
 Thought "it was best the bird to smother!"  
 Or "send the convict for his felonies  
 Back to his native land—the colonies."  
 "But milder views prevailed. His sentence  
 Was, that until he showed repentance,  
 "A solemn fast and frugal diet,  
 Silence exact, and pensive quiet,  
 Should be his lot;" and, for a blister,  
 Hé'got, as gaoler, a lay sister,  
 Ugly as sin, bad-tempered, jealous,  
 And in her scruples over-zealous.

A jug of water and a carrot  
 Was all the prog she'd give the parrot :  
 But every eve when vesper-bell  
 Called Sister Rosalie from her cell,  
 She to Ver-Vert would gain admittance,  
 And bring of "comfits" a sweet pittance.  
 Comfits! alas! can sweet confections  
 Alter sour slavery's imperfections?  
 The sternest virtue in the hulks,  
 Though crammed with richest sweetmeats, sulks.

Taught by his gaoler and adversity,  
 Poll saw the folly of perversity,  
 And by degrees his heart relented :  
 Duly, in fine, "the lad" repented.  
 His *Lent* passed on, and Sister Bridget  
 Coaxed the old abbess to abridge it.

The prodigal, reclaimed and free,  
 Became again a prodigy,  
 And gave more joy, by works and words,  
 Than ninety-nine canary-birds,  
 Until his death. Which last disaster  
 (Nothing on earth endures!) came faster  
 Than they imagined. The transition  
 From a starved to a stuffed condition,  
 From penitence to jollification,  
 Brought on a fit of constipation.  
 And from a short life and a merry,  
 Poll sailed one day per Charon's ferry.

*Gresset (1709-1777).*