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The Fox's Reward
By Mark Scrivener

CHARACTERS

Vulpes	a shrewd lawyer 40+ (<i>Vool-pahs</i>)
Marguerite	his wife
Jasper	a greedy draper
William	his young shepherd
Judge Jeeble	white-haired, solemn

The action takes place in the course of a day.

Act One- Morning

Act Two- Midday

Act Three- An hour or two later

Act Four- Late afternoon

NB the action could also been seen as two acts (ACT ONE=1-3, ACT TWO= 4) with interval between.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

Medieval. Early morning. Vulpes sits on a stool outside his house, humming.

Enter Marguerite. She stands in the doorway.

Marguerite

Just look at you, you luckless good-for-little,
Fine, lounging fox in lazy morning sun;
You idle shame, you poor excuse for shadow!
The work-called day is scarcely under way
And you're already resting your poor legs.

Vulpes

Poor legs, poor arms, poor body, and poor me!
I'm poor all over; there's a plain-seen truth.

I'm rich in poverty, in lack a lord.
 Thus seen, what I have not, amounts to much-
 A seeming set of clothes; good gold in store;
 Food filling larders; fine and flowing cloaks;
 An eager steed to gallop from my dust;
 A library rich in law and lighter reading;
 And manifold besides. Indeed, my wealth,
 In penury, is most astonishing.

Marguerite (*smiling*)

I am not moved, dear fool, to feel amazed;
 Nor much amused by turning words which would
 Spin dark to light, bleak cold to summer heat;
 For all I see still speaks a tattered truth,
 Proclaiming your time-patched appearance as
 Ill-starred, unfavoured by Fortuna, like
 A tuneless minstrel or a poor-voiced player.

Vulpes (*yawning*)

Ah, Marguerite, however hard I labour
 To pluck plump winnings from my work, I find
 I cannot pile a few, fit coins together.
 The harvest of my wit brings withered fruit.
 Yet once I'd many ripe, rich clients; many.
 How fickle fortune's fated wheel. How hard
 To hold on high; to keep from creaking downward.

Marguerite (*mock serious*)

Oh, Vulpes, stop! My ears, my ears just ring
 From ever-hearing your sad rant about
 Your faultless fall from fortune's grace and all

The gratitude your once-great clients showed.
 Did all your wit and word-embroidered cunning
 Fit you to forecast this misfortune's flood?
 Have you good cure for its cause? Forget
 Your fine, past cases famed in court. These days,
 Through all the length and width of world, there lives
 No one who feels minutest faith in you.

Vulpes

No faith. Indeed, it is a faithless world.

Marguerite (*ironically*)

Well said, and what a marvel to pronounce.
 Is this some wonder no one trusts your talent?
 You boast no recent cases of repute.
 Yet I recall how once they all would want
 No one but you to win their court-blessed battles.
 You know what laughing name they leave you now?
 The has-been lawyer. That is what I've heard.

Vulpes

But nonetheless, and I am not in this
 Just simply preening frayed and faded feathers,
 Mine is the eagle mind of all this district,
 In force and flight so far above the others
 They seem mere distant magpies, crows, and sparrows.

Marguerite

Fine-feathered maybe, but with empty nest.

Vulpes (*blustering*)

Just try to image forth a case that I
 Would not win once I matched my mind to it.
 Yet I show not as spectacled professor,
 Some greybeard pouring over yellowed parchment.
 But though I'm not a rule book swat, I could
 Beat any haggling Latin-learned scholar
 And pound his argument into dry dust.

Marguerite

Intoning vanished glory fills no bellies,
 Nor bans the thin and bitter ghost of hunger.
 Look at our weary clothes- all holes and patches,
 But fit for biting wind and scorn to blow through!

Vulpes

Our clothes, our clothes! Are those your only bother?
 Look, nothing is as swift as changing fortune.
 One spin of fate can make a beggar king;
 One dice roll make the poorest gambler smile,
 For there's no chilling night that's everlasting
 For after dark new dawn delights the sky.

Marguerite

To wait for chance lets chances slip you by.

Vulpes

By all the stars that gleam in God's great heaven,
 By both great, golden sun and silver moon,
 Just give old lightning wit a chance to think-
 No brain helps better than mine does at this.

(Vulpes taps his head)

Marguerite

Yes, no one owns such craft at cunning cheating.

Vulpes

At honest pleading, dear, at honest pleading
And all the finer, tangled points of law.

Marguerite

Yes, lying, swindling and misrepresenting.
You know your fundamental flaw? There lives
Not one soul who would credit you with growing
A single scholared hair upon your head.
Yet all agree that head is packed with cunning,
With slyness, craft and wit and trickery.

Vulpes

Yes, yes. Correct. A master of the law.
A dean of disputation, that's a fact.

Marguerite

A little lord of lies- so others think.

Vulpes

I work no worse than all those fools who dress
In silks and satins; peacock-proud and brainless...

*(Vulpes looks across to where Jasper, the draper, has started putting out
cloth on display on a bench before his shop)*

In silks and satins...curiously though
My mind's just made a way this very moment.

Dear wife, adieu. Adieu to you. I'm off
To market to begin some bargaining.

Marguerite

To market, fool?

Vulpes

Yes, mark it- to the market!

Marguerite

I mark it well and marking it I mark
You've missed your mark, for mark well my remark,
If I don't miss the mark in marking this-
You're off to market now with empty pockets,
Remarkably impoverished, without
A penny.

Vulpes

Marking your remarks I mark
Although I'm penniless with empty pockets,
You'll mark my head's not empty. Though I'm penceless,
I am not senseless: for my wealth's aloft.
By marking well this last remark, you'll mark
I have already marked a market mark
And will not miss my mark. Is that marked clearly?

Marguerite

Quite. As a black horse on a starless night.

Vulpes (*grandly*)

Dear wife, if I do not return with cloth

Capacious quite to dress the both of us
 Then call me- call me senseless then. Adieu.
 I shall return with richest robes for you.

(Vulpes exits stage right)

Marguerite *(after him)*

Adieu. Drink all you can, good Master Wit;
 As long as another fool is buying it.

(with satisfaction to herself)

It took a little stirring to rekindle
 The mettle of his mischief and to bring
 His will from melancholy idleness
 To flashing, fiery, and persuasive life.
 But now, awake at last, it would appear
 The hungry fox has sniffed a rabbit near.

(Marguerite exits, returning back through the house.)

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

The same. The Draper still putting out wares.

Jasper *(happily to himself)*

Another sun-spun day filled with fine promise,
 The joyful promise of good profit found
 By fleecing foolish customers. As ever
 My plans are purposed to perfection, for
 My shepherds shear four-footed sheep, while I
 The woolly-headed ones who wish to buy.

(Jasper continues to arrange cloths. Vulpes enters top stage right. He pauses.)

Vulpes *(musing)*

First I consider need. What weaving hue
 Best pleases free and flighty fancy's choosing?
 Should it be spread of light, heart-soothing blue,
 Like wide and airy sky's infinitude?
 Or white as is the carpet of fresh snow
 That biting winter lays on all below?
 Or maybe flame-brave red of sunset's gown?
 Or sober beauty of an earth-born brown?
 Perhaps the calm and growing garb of green,
 Of grass and forest, draws regard when seen?

(Vulpes starts to cross over.)

For Marguerite, say, two yards and a half;
 For me, let's see, a happy three or more...
 Say, possibly a generous four...that is,
 That is, in sum...

(Suddenly realizing he is at the draper's)

God-given day, good friend!

And how spins life with you, good Jasper, now,
 Upon this bright and merry-minded morning?

Jasper *(with a falsely melancholic air)*

So, so, good Vulpes. Yes; so, so. You know
 I am not bitter-mouthed. I am not one
 To carp at life with hard-complaining tongue.
 Yet still it forms no simple task to find
 Necessities in these most narrow times-
 These times when opportunity's a beggar

At tight-faced circumstance's door; these times
 When we who once were proud of purse must watch
 That we don't fall and pass to common poor.
 But that's enough of weight and worry's way.
 How's life with you? You seem spun light in spirit.

Vulpes

Indeed, my friend, that's so. My spirit's light
 Because my pockets pull so golden-heavy.
 I do not doubt your keen, fine ears have caught
 The whisper on the gossip of the winds,
 Soft rumour of my recent win: the case,
 Word-wise with wit, I won some weeks ago.

Jasper

No, no. Can't claim I have.

Vulpes

What! Really? Well,

Tales of good fortune travel on tired feet,
 While those of ruin ride on fiery steeds...
 But nevertheless that bodes for me no bother.
 I do not wish to bar my fortune's state
 To curious and common gaze. Still, how's
 Your health, my friend, how goes the living power?

Jasper

Oh, holding, saints be praised, still holding out.

Vulpes

Good faith be praised! Just as your father flourished!

He never knew an hour of wasteful illness
 In all the bustle of his days. Now there,
 I say, there was a proper one for you!

(Vulpes peers at Jasper)

And now to see it... now to look at you,
 You are the very pattern of your pater,
 His very likeness. Yes, he was a rare,
 Old raven. So much like you. God save his soul!

Jasper

Amen.

Vulpes

Yes, many were ripe times when he
 Held forth upon the future course of things...
 A shrewd and crafty one he seemed to be!
 The "weather-vane" we named him, for he ever
 Would swing to point the way the winds were blowing.

Jasper

He was a tough but honest business man
 And people liked to buy from him, you know.

Vulpes

Yes, many's the time I took from him myself.
 Oh, he was one to trust to his own judgement.
 But spins it not with wonder! You possess
 The firm set of his mouth, his scheme of eyes,
 The ears acute, that bravely searching nose.
 Was ever father blessed with such a double.
 Oh, even his blunt chin. Remarkable!

So many merry times we listened to
 His moral tales or shared a harmless jest.
 If there breathed more like him they'd live more trust,
 Less thievery and low conniving.

(Vulpes starts to finger some cloth)

My, my,

A brave cloth you have here. So soft and strong.

Jasper

It's very fine. A weave from my own sheep.

Vulpes

I'd spun no plans to purchase such as this
 On this particular, life-praising day.
 Yet this close-woven cloth is excellent-
 Most truly tempting to the eyes and touch,
 Most rightly pleasing to a true discernment.
 Such blue-hued beauty shines as praise to that
 Most careful craft that forms the dyer's art.

Jasper

Like any work of gleaming craftsmanship
 It's rather costly... you can understand...
 But for a family friend...

Vulpes *(interrupting)*

Indeed, you know

It fires special fancy at first sight.
 My case has gifted my poor purse with eighty
 Gold-gleaming coins and I can see that you
 Are sure to share in some of their abundance.

The colour- ah, like rarest art for vision!

Jasper

Good, golden coins. Well, if I cut it hard,
 Just for a family friend (it's worth more, mind you),
 Perhaps I'd let you rob me for, let's say,
 Just four and twenty shillings for a yard.

Vulpes

What! Four and twenty shillings for a yard!

Jasper

By all that's tall in truth, I tell you this-
 It costs me all of that just to replace.

Vulpes

Oh, that amount amounts to much. Too much!
 For though I've moment's wealth I cannot waste,
 Like rough and spendthrift winds that shake gold leaves
 From autumn trees to leave a winter bareness;
 So I can't spend without clear thought on cost
 And end too soon with rubbing empty hands.

Jasper

Perhaps you don't appreciate how prices
 Have soared beyond the safety of all sense.
 So many beasts expired from cruel frost
 Or fell before the lash of blizzard fury,
 This long, ice-bitter winter past, so many!

Vulpes

But surely we were blessed by hours of sun
 On many chains of golden days that cheered
 The mildest season which I well-remember?

Jasper (*quickly*)

Oh, no. Oh, no, my friend. For on the far,
 Far higher fields it showed another face:
 A winter wild and heightened by the heights.
 Those slopes were ever slashed by wind so harsh
 It was itself like knives of ice unseen,
 With long, long nights that froze each singing stream.
 And thus, in certain consequence, all costs
 Have rapid-climbed like sudden storm's arising.
 Yes, it has been misfortune's very making
 And I have found my loss more than I feared.
 Why, fleeces that once cost but seven shillings
 Are now worth twenty. That's the open truth.

Vulpes (*grandly*)

Be that the nature of our costly days,
 Then I shall buy. One must accept the changes
 Of proper circumstance and passing time.

Jasper

Amen. That is a truth. How much have you
 A fancy to be taking for your needs?

Vulpes

Let's see- four yards for me, some for my wife,
 Let's say- two and a half, and with the hat

Let's guess at seven.

Jasper (*measuring the cloth*)

Thus I'll start true measure.

If one's the sun above- that shines on you
 Then that is two... and also shines on me
 Then that is three...then earth below, what's more,
 Is four... and air that keeps us all alive
 Is five... while life's a mix of many tricks
 And that is six... yet still we ever hope
 For high reward in heaven... so that's seven!

Vulpes

No doubt you're well aware that honest care
 Proscribes a slipshod measure that's not strict.

Jasper

Perhaps you'd like it taken once again?

Vulpes

No. Worry not. For one must always lose
 Or gain a little in this dealing world.
 How much therefore is owed in total now?

Jasper

Well, seven yards at four and twenty shillings,
 Just let me reckon rightly for a moment...

(Jasper fiddles with an abacus)

That is one hundred and eighty eight in all.

(Jasper cuts the cloth)

Vulpes (*after calculating for a moment*)

One hundred and sixty eight, I think you mean.

Jasper (*pushing back two beads on abacus*)

Oh, yes. Of course. Quite quickly rightly reckoned.

I cannot think what made me stumble so.

Vulpes

Fine, fine. Of course, for simple safety's sake

I do not bare such large amounts with me.

I had not planned to purchase such a prize

When I set out upon this shining day.

So sooner started, sooner done. I shall

Return as fast as reasoned, fair intention

Is able to instruct my willing legs

With sparkling pockets filled with settling coins.

(Vulpes makes to go, but suddenly stops as if struck by an idea.)

No, no. I'm blessed by better thought than that.

You've never caught excuse to call on us,

So here's a golden chance for you to change

And taste of timely hospitality.

Come share some juicy goose and bubbling wine-

A good chat and a filling midday meal.

You surely can't refuse me that.

Jasper

A drink?

Vulpes

And goose. My wife was roasting fine, rich fowl

When I set out to greet this friendly day.
 To taste the truth, I feel this meal will be
 A favour of true flavour for the tongue,
 A gift, a feast, a marvel for the mouth.
 Indeed, you'll find your goose well-cooked, I fancy.

Jasper

All right. That reasons well with me. Meanwhile
 On your return please ready worthy money
 And I'll be pleased to take your pleasing offer
 And carry your most-splendid cloth with me.

Vulpes

Oh, no. Oh, no. No problem there, my friend!

(Vulpes scoops the cloth up under his arm)

Jasper

No doubt your meal will draw my many thanks
 As table's bounty tasting of the best.
 Yet now, my dear, old friend, you must allow
 That I should bear the burden of this cloth.

(Jasper tries to take back the cloth)

Vulpes *(evading him)*

No, no, dear friend! I must insist that I
 Shall save you all the labour of this load.

(Vulpes stops suddenly and looks serious)

Or do I here detect a drop of doubt?
 Trust is that high-born virtue, that which binds

This turning world in harmony- or so
 I've ever felt and thought. Indeed, I fear
 I cannot carry out my buying trade,
 If there's no trust between us now, dear brother.

(Vulpes offers back the cloth)

Jasper

Do not believe that I have no belief
 In honest dealing, dearest brother! Of course,
 I trust you truly for I know you know
 That I would never fear default, for I
 Trust I would always find a way to reach
 An owing purse. The law is guarantee
 For honoured traders such as I. So see
 The counted gold is gathered there for me.

Vulpes

In truth, all worthy pay shall come to you.
 Yet first you shall full-marvel at your meal.
 You know, your father never passed our place
 Without familiar greeting: "How go your stars?"
 Or "what is stewing now, you crafty rascal?"
 Ah, well, I must be off. See you at noon.

Jasper

All right, dear friend. I'll be with you quite soon.
 In fact, I smell sweet-roasting goose already.
 Still please be sure my rightful money's ready.
 For if it's not, dear friend, you'd best beware,
 I'll drag you to the court and when I'm through,

I'll end up wringing twice as much from you!

Vulpes

My friend, my friend, feel not the slightest fear.

All you deserve will doubtlessly appear.

(Jasper exits via his shop)

ACT TWO SCENE ONE

The same. Vulpes crossing back to his house

Vulpes

His money, money! Oh, his sainted money!

Forever rings his tiresome chatter like

Some pompous parrot in a gilded cage.

The twisted, black-souled enemy of man

Take him and all his false, greed-gotten gains!

(with a laugh)

As if I'd any coins to bless my name.

So short of money is he? Times are hard?

What gabbling rubbish! Times aren't tough for him.

The dull-eyed, thin-faced ghost of poverty

Has not been sitting at his table. No,

My plump and purse-proud friend, if you arrive

To sponge on our sparse victuals you'll leave

A very hungry guest. Ah, Marguerite,

I have returned. About those honest-worn

And wholly hole-blessed clothes of ours...

(Marguerite enters and Vulpes hides the cloth behind his back)

Marguerite

Oh, yes.

And what wild weavings have you schemed for them?

Vulpes

I merely thought, my dear, you might be moved

To take a sharing in my shopping raid.

How's this for fine and useful cloth?

(Vulpes produces the cloth)

Marguerite *(feeling the cloth)*

Most fine,

Most useful, as you say. But what poor fool

Was promptly parted from his property?

If I know you, you haven't paid a penny.

Vulpes

No, not a single hard-won coin of mine

Has gone to gain this splendid cloth.

Marguerite

So husband,

You sly, word-spinning, swindling prankster,

Who was the victim of your fluency?

Vulpes

Oh, just that Jasper. Tight-fisted fool he is.

Marguerite

What tricks and falsities have won his trust?
 He's such a shifty and coin-counting crow.

Vulpes

I almost drowned him in delusive praise.
 I told him of my friendship with his fine
 And great-souled father, then remarked upon
 The real resemblance that his aspect shows
 To his most generous progenitor.
 Jove knows though, really he's the ugliest rat
 That fortune's shipwreck ever washed ashore.
 "Ah, good friend, Jasper," then quoth I,
 "How pater-paired in pattern, form and feature!"
 Which is part true: his dearest father was
 A rodent-faced rascalion as well.
 In short, I plied him with such flattery
 And then dropped hints of interest in his cloth.
 And in the end he almost pushed it on me.

Marguerite

Trust you to talk with double tongue. So when
 Are we to reimburse?

Vulpes

To reimburse?

I'd pay the fiend's black entourage back first.

Marguerite

So like old Æsop's fabled, foolish crow
 Your fox-sly flattery just made him drop

The tasty prize into your waiting paws?

Vulpes

And soon he will arrive to taste some fowl
 To find himself the only goose around.
 So when he starts to clamour for his fee
 This is my present plan. I shall be abed
 As if in life-endangering, fierce illness.
 And when he raps upon my bolted door,
 In greatest melancholy you must beg
 Respectful silence for the nearly dead.
 If he then claims a past propinquity...

Marguerite

More plainly put! For you are not defending
 Yourself before a judge... at least, not yet.

Vulpes

That is, he says he saw me just this morning.

Marguerite

Yes, certain as star show brings glow of dawning,
 He's bound to claim so, boldly confident.

Vulpes

Then you must say: "He's been bed-bound for weeks."
 To which he shouts: "A joke, a cunning hoax.
 Don't try to blind me with your lying talk!"
 To which, indignant, you reply: "Is this
 The moment for your joking tales, the time
 To exercise your jesting tongue!" Then I

Shall all at once appear and do the rest.

Marguerite (*thoughtfully*)

It reasons quite a reasonable result,
 Providing we convince with false conviction,
 And furthermore I do not like at all
 That pompous draper's cheating rule. So be it!
 So I shall play my part with some perfection;
 But if it sours and he drags us to court,
 We'll really catch a whack of stinging trouble!

Vulpes

No, no. My plan's in perfect place! I know
 The maddened measure of my masquerade!

Marguerite

In perfect place! Just like that Saturday
 You spent last year in patient meditation
 On your misdeeds behind hard, perfect bars.

Vulpes

O that! A foolish matter that, no more.
 A minor, brief misunderstanding, dear.
 Indeed, a mere mistake! Back to this present!
 Now he will soon be here to feast on air,
 His eager palm outstretched for promised gold,
 And we've no coins to greet his legal price.
 I'll be in bed.

Marguerite

Then go, dear dying double-dealer.

Vulpes

Take care to curb all cackling cachinnation!

Marguerite

What's that in words?

Vulpes

Just see that you don't laugh.

Marguerite

No, I shall weep like sudden summer showers.

Vulpes

So sail on straight as if your course were true,

No stalling of your resolute intent.

The faintest puff of falsehood and we founder.

Remember he'll be certain it's a trick!

Marguerite

Go on. You be the dead, I'll be the quick.

(Vulpes enters the bedroom by front as if a door. He hides the cloth under the bed, then lies on the bed groaning and turning. Marguerite goes within and starts practising gentle sobbing)

ACT TWO SCENE TWO

Music. The same. Towards midday. Jasper comes out of his shop, dressed for visiting.

Jasper *(talking to himself as he crosses over)*

No doubt his gleam-rich stash of doubtful gold

Is hidden well away from prying fingers-
 Most likely loot that he has lifted from
 Some ready fool who fell for sly-spun words
 Or else extracted by some other means
 Not open to right law's strict-searching sight.
 Still, that's no matter to concern my mind.
 The gabbling cheat was green enough to pay
 His four and twenty coins a yard for cloth
 That never will be worth an honest twenty.

(Jasper knocks at Vulpes's door- in mime at invisible wall.)

Jasper *(loudly)*

Hello there, master Vulpes!

Marguerite *(appearing at the "doorway")*

By heaven's call,

Sweet patience lend a softness to your tone.
 If you've some death-bed message to deliver
 Let it be lulling-low. He must be shrouded,
 In his most troubled and repentant time,
 By restful weave of hushed and soothing peace.

Jasper *(still full-voiced)*

The mighty grace above us save you, madam!

Marguerite *(firmly)*

Good sir, I ask you to diminish voice.

Jasper *(stepping forward)*

By all that's good, now what is going on?

Marguerite (*wringing her hands*)

Oh, please, good sir; oh, please, please pity him!

Jasper (*pointing*)

Just tell me this one thing: is he within?

Marguerite

Where else?

Jasper (*Jasper starting to move towards door*)

Good, good. You see, I've come to see...

Marguerite (*blocking him and interrupting with a fierce whisper*)

That poves my point. My poor dear man's within;

At home with me, at home till his last moan.

Who else in this uncaring world would care?

The wounded bear bolts for his darkened cave.

The stricken fox hides in his furtive den.

Poor soul, he's lain here, wasting, six, long weeks,

Six weeks of weakening and worry's burden,

So fragile-ill he cannot even rise.

Jasper (*stepping back a little*)

By all the great and watching powers above...

Marguerite

Please widen ears, sir, for I mustn't lift

My voice. The luckless devil's all done for.

Past sins, like many ghastrly spectres rise

To haunt him, and life's thread draws thin.

Indeed, he's but a ghost himself, a pale
 And willess wraith, his wits deserting him-
 A drifting relic of his former self.

Jasper

Who's this? I mean, whom do you mean?

Marguerite

Why sir,

I mean, truth told, my man, good master Vulpes,
 That once-famed lawyer, lost to fortune's gaze,
 Now broken by the turn of time's great wheel,
 My own, my only one, my dearest husband.

Jasper

Good master Vulpes, your own dearest husband?
 He just took seven yards of cloth from me!

Marguerite (*with phoney wonder*)

What's this you say? My dearest dear?

Jasper (*advancing on her*)

Yes, yes,

I'm telling you, but some short time ago.
 By all the sacred saints, this is too much!
 He owes me for those yards of finest weave.
 Do not false-play me! Seek not to deceive!
 My money or my cloth, good Mistress Mischief.

Marguerite (*throwing up her hands*)

What crazy-minded stuff is this you're talking?

Is this, perhaps, some stupid prank you're playing,
A tasteless, teasing trick, a cruel game?

Jasper

Believe me, Madam, oh, believe me now,
I've no intention, not the mildest urge
To spin some silly freak of foolery.

Marguerite

Then why appear and burden my poor heart
With childish, untrue tales about my dear?

Jasper (*impatiently*)

Look, no more joking!

Marguerite

What! What! No more joking!

What fooling, fool, do you imagine here?
Is this the time for tossing wanton words?
Is this the day for jibes and witless jesting?

Vulpes (*within, rolling on the bed and groaning*)

Ahhhh!

Marguerite (*advancing on him*)

Hear that! Hear that! The poor dear's nearly done.
I doubt he'll live to see another sun.
Yet you come here and plague me with your lies!

Jasper (*backing off a little, then advancing*)

No! No! This is dark madness or deception:

The very demon of absurdity.
 By reason's beams that, sunlike, shine upon
 What stands as real, respond and pass to me
 My money now or else my precious cloth!

Marguerite

Your money or your cloth? What words are these?
 Such speech is wild and whirling, without sense.
 Go play your childish pranks upon some fool
 With time to humour you, you chattering ratbag!

Jasper (*indignantly*)

My words bear perfect patterning- they witness
 The simple evidence of my own sense.
 The good, high Lord of Heaven strike me dead
 If I'm not owed the rightly-reckoned sum.

Vulpes (*within*)

Ahhhhh!

Marguerite

Be gone. I'm in no mood for mindless banter.
 Go on, be off, you crow! Go flap your wings
 And soar. Go caw at someone else's door.

Jasper (*folding his arms*)

That's quite enough; enough good Mistress Mayhem.
 Please ask good master Vulpes to appear.
 I wish a present, private word with him.

Vulpes

Ahhhhh!

Marguerite

The black fiend take you! What! Disturb him now?

Jasper

Yet surely truth's call calls you to admit
This is the very dwelling place of Vulpes.
This here- his very house, his very land!

Marguerite

Indeed. We're not all sense-bereft like you.
So please, please lower your proud, lofty bellow;
Please moderate your mighty, ringing tone.

Jasper (*advancing towards the door*)

The devil swallow it! By all fair dealing,
I'll speak here as I feel that I should speak-
To place my point each sentence rightly seeks
Full-needed sense and sound. No more; no less!

Vulpes

Ahhhhh!

Marguerite (*taking his arm and dragging him back*)

May Heaven save us! Soft, speak soft and low,
Or else your very violence to the air
Will snap the dwindling thread of wasting life.

Jasper (*shaking her off*)

Soft? soft!? You wish me whispering to you?
 Or signalling in silence with my hands?
 Perhaps we'd have a quieter conversation,
 As you reveal all things to be reversed,
 If I stood on my head to speak to you.

Marguerite (*throwing up her hands*)

You always were an endless chatterbox.

Jasper

One of us, madam, has lost the mind's clear light
 And wanders, woeful, in unreasoned night.
 I'll quieten down when you treat me to truth-
 Your patient took my yards of cloth for cure.

Marguerite (*indignantly*)

I wish some wrathful wind would carry off
 All those whose careless speaking so infests
 The reaches of the world-caressing breath.
 You pompous prattler! You accusing ape!
 You jesting jackass! He has lain, bed-bound,
 Six weeks! Six sorry weeks! Be off with you!
 Leave us to lonely worry... leave us be!
 I've trouble here enough without your fooling.

Jasper (*flinging up his hands*)

You ask soft speech from me, yet loudly beat
 The very bounty of the air yourself?

Marguerite

With you upon their threshold, frothing mad,
 And spewing forth these false-lipped allegations,
 Who would not feel inflamed and briefly fall
 Into a sudden bout of thoughtless shouting?

Jasper (*attempting to advance again*)

I'll go if you just give what's due to me.

Marguerite (*raising her fist*)

I'll give to you what rightly is your due!

Jasper (*quickly*)

If that's the case- I think I'll take my coins.
 Just place them in my palm and we'll forget
 All trouble over this or that.

Marguerite

What coins?

Do you believe we should be billed for your
 Fantastical and fevered fantasies?
 Do you suppose we owe you gold to go;
 That we should greet your hand with gain to leave;
 That we should pay so you depart in peace?

Jasper

Well then, no gold- I'll take my cloth instead.

Marguerite

What cloth? You're always speaking of this cloth!
 The only cloth my poor heart will be using

Will be his white and tight-wrapped winding sheet.
 Unplug your ears, you blockhead! Understand!
 Just see the simple sense my words display.
 The only way that he will leave this house
 Will be, that is my certain fear, head first!

Jasper (*vehemently*)

Yet I just met him now this very morning;
 This very morning talked and sold him cloth!
 He seemed as full of heart and healthy spirit
 As any man could wish to be!

Marguerite (*finger to lips*)

Sssh! Sssh!

Will you start speaking softly? Yes or no?

Jasper

As I've remarked already your denials
 Sound louder on the innocence of air.

Vulpes (*within*)

You wicked, sinful woman, let in light!
 Who are these black and hooded people here?
 Oh, mamacrama! Mamamamacrama! (*ah as in father*)
 Away! Drive them away! Away, I say!

Marguerite

Defy the crafty, wicked one, my Vulpes.
 Beat back the clever demons of delusion.
 Keep sharply gripped to your own sanity!

Vulpes (*within*)

Oh, can't you see what I can see? Look there!
 A black, back monk is winging through the air:
 A bat-faced beast, his robes are all outspread!

Marguerite (*to Jasper*)

Now do you see? He's gone again. I hope
 This fills your heart with happiness and joy.
 Your crazy speech has sparked his haunted spirit;
 Delusion grips the marrow of his mind.

Vulpes (*coming out, wrapped in a sheet*)

Who's there? Who's there?

(Vulpes pretends to take Jasper for the doctor)

Oh, doctor, doctor, oh,

I have been ill; so very, very ill,
 So very, very, very ill, dear doctor;
 Oh, doctor, do not make me swallow more
 Of that black, bitter, biting medicine!

Jasper

What's all of this to me, my dear, old friend?
 It's only four and twenty coins a yard,
 Just four and twenty that I need from you.

Vulpes

I've got three hard, black pieces here, good doctor.
 You call them pills? They nearly break my jaw!

Jasper

You've still to give me twenty-four a yard.

Vulpes (*dancing around*)

Oh, twenty-four! Oh, twenty-four no more!
 Give me but twenty-four to live: one day
 With hours enough now to repent my ways!

Marguerite

See! See now how he's lost again! By all
 Far, twinkling stars that ring the night, they ought
 To string up interfering fiends like you!
 Go on! Get going! Be off with you, you devil!
 Go! Lift those flat and foolish feet of yours!

Jasper (*stubbornly*)

By every beneficial force that guards
 The great unfolding of our days, I won't.
 I won't be off without my cloth; my cloth
 Or all the settled coins I'm rightly owed.

Vulpes (*scrabbling at Jasper, so that Jasper starts backing away*)

Oh, doctor, doctor dear, oh, dearest doctor,
 I greatly fear I have brought up so much
 That I might simply fade away, like smoke,
 Dissolving off into the endless distance,
 The wide, wide, living stretches of the sky.

Marguerite (*to Jasper*)

Must you forever go on mouthing madness
 About your phantom cloth, tormenting him
 When he's so troubled, tried; so nearly gone?
 Who dreams delusion in a greater measure?

Who lives illusion more now? You or he?
 However, you are sound enough while he
 Walks in delirium, approaching death.
 He stands before its dark, dark door. Oh, surely
 It is enough to leave him thus, caught in
 The crushing coils of serpent misery?
 A thousand times I say- he's been this way
 For six long weeks imprisoned in a bed.

Vulpes

A bed! O restful bed! Where is my bed?
(Vulpes totters off, back to bed)

Jasper *(shaking his head)*

How's all this happened since we met this morning?
 For surely, surely we did meet this morning
 And made brave bargain... or at least, I think...

Marguerite *(with sympathy)*

Perhaps you fell into some phantasy of sense.
 You overwork and weariness confuses thought.
 Your mind is tired and misconstrues plain truth
 And takes to dreaming through your open eyes.
 Soon feeble vision fails and so you find
 You're spinning out all sorts of spectred scenes.
 Heed good advice- go rest a little while.

Jasper *(uncertainly)*

Yet I saw certain sight, as certain as
 The sun on high... are you preparing goose?

Marguerite (*indignantly*)

Bright stars above! Oh, what a thing to ask?
Is that fit food for feeble invalids!
Go cook a goose yourself, sir, if you want one!

Vulpes (*from within*)

Ahhhhh!

Jasper

I beg you, please don't think my visit vile;
I really thought...and I still do, indeed...
Indeed I do...I swear I'll find my cloth...

(Jasper moves towards the door but changes his mind)

But if I'm wrong how crass my part will sound.
How all the town will point to me as he
Who like some madman would demand the dying
Pay fee for his own fevered fantasy.
This wretched wife of his, with all her wailing,
Has muddled morning's simple certainty.
I know he nabbed my cloth- and yet it seems
He's tortured by some terrible disease.
I wonder if it's caught with ease? No, no;
I know short-past he hailed me hale and whole...
That is, I think he is...that is, this morning...
Can I, perhaps, be dreaming some strange dream?
Where meaning means not what it seems to mean?
It could be so, for if awake would I
Give my good credit to a dog like him!
Oh, hang me high for lending him my trust;
For now I can't break through confusion's wall-
I cannot clearly catch this thing at all!

(Jasper goes back to his shop, shaking his head and exits)

ACT TWO SCENE THREE

The same. Marguerite outside watching Jasper go. Vulpes comes to the door and whispers.

Vulpes

So has that sneaking son of an abacus
Gone yet?

Marguerite

Hush, hush, you fool.! Get back to bed.
For if, by sudden chance, he did return
And found you strolling round with such a look
Of health and satisfaction like some fox
Whose furry belly's fat with farm-bred fowl,
I'm sure he'd see with but a single glance
Right through the whole of our well-played pretence.

Vulpes

Still, nonetheless, by all the shining shields
Of all brave-hearted, dragon-slaying knights,
We really shafted that coin-hoarding reptile!

Marguerite *(laughing)*

You should have seen the stunned bewilderment
All-featured on his face as he was leaving!
His mind was so divided that his vision
Was seeing truth and falsity as one.

Vulpes

Now by the patron saint of cheats and rascals,
 Whoever that may be, stop laughing, dear!
 For now I ponder it, you were full-right,
 He may return at any present time,
 And if he heard your laughing ringing out,
 Our trick so fine would flame in smoke and fire,
 Its slyly-crafted edifice consumed
 By seeing truth's incendiary, bright eye.

Marguerite (*giggling*)

Oh, dear, oh, dear, I'd stop if I were able!

(Marguerite puts her hand to her mouth to stifle the giggling)

Jasper (*coming to the door of his shop*)

Now by the glorious sun that lights our eyes
 And brings night-hidden truths to every view,
 I'm bravely going back to battle that
 Light-fingered lawyer and his lying ways.
 A little, golden nest egg, did he say?
 I'll hatch those hidden eggs or hatch a case.
 For, by Saint Jude, I know he's got my cloth.
 Now I'm back here, recovered to clear mind,
 I trust to proof of memory and reason;
 And thus I know with knowing's certainty
 That he absconded with his woven booty,
 Tight-tucked beneath his healthy, thieving arm,
 This very day indeed- indeed he did!

Vulpes (*urgently to Marguerite*)

Stop laughing, dear! He may bounce back, you know.

Indeed, my very marrow tells me so.

For he's of stubborn, thick and solid stock

And will not be put off by just one shock.

(Vulpes shepherds Marguerite inside)

ACT TWO SCENE FOUR

The same Vulpes and Marguerite in bedroom. Marguerite still stifling laughter. Jasper crosses and approaches.

Jasper (*returning*)

That lawyer's head is full of windy schemes:

All waffle and weird nonsense. Does he think

That I am such a lightly hoodwinked fool?

I'll show that cheat he won't cheat me with ease,

For all the shabby tricks that he can muster.

He's hangman-ripe, the rotten heretic.

(Jasper knocks loudly on Vulpes' door)

Hey you! Hey, hey, come let me in!

Marguerite

Oh, no!

He's heard me laughing. Now he'll be aflame.

Vulpes

Don't drop your part before the critic's gaze.

I'll play delirious pretence upon

A broader stage and so convince the sceptic

Who wavers still between belief and doubt.

Go, open wide the door.

Marguerite (*coming to the door*)

Quiet, quiet, you hothead!

What's this unmindful racket you're creating?
Enough to fright a ghost from graveyard sleep,
Or summon all the demons of the deep.

Jasper (*as she opens the 'door'*)

You laugh, you laugh, do you?

Marguerite

What! Are you mad?

Do you suppose I find amusement here?
I've nothing, no, no, nothing, nothing, nothing,
No, not a single thing, to laugh about.
By all the saints who guard celestial paths,
I'd sooner spin upon my sorry head.
My poor, poor dear has almost passed away!
Such raving, oh, such raging! Deliriums!
Mad singing! Such a flow of crazy scenes!
Trapped in delusions- caught in strangest dreams!
He gabbles half a dozen, senseless tongues
With wild and meaningless sincerity.
Indeed, I doubt he'll live another hour.
It's quite enough to make me weep and laugh
Together now.

Jasper (*firmly*)

Not one jot do I care!

It's less to me than babble at a fair.

For he can speak in every speech that springs
 Beneath the sun, for all it bothers me.
 I owe but one essential speech to give,
 One thing to utter now while you both live-
 You give me back my cloth or pay my fee!

(Vulpes enters looking dishevelled)

Vulpes *(wildly)*

Stand for her Majesty! Salute and bow.
 The Queen of Lutes! Sir, have you lost your lute?
 I know she recently gave painful birth
 To four and twenty bright lutettes. They are
 All children of the cloth. Their father is
 Good Jasper, the archbishop. That would mean
 That I, good sir, must be their guardian.

Jasper *(stepping back)*

What rubbish is he gabbling now? Come on,
 I wish for payment for my cloth you've taken.

Marguerite *(to Jasper)*

Is not the one mistake sufficiency?

Vulpes *(singing and capering)*

Oh payment, payment. Oh, how shall we pay
 The Great Lord on that last and judgement day?
 Oh, owing, owing. O heart, what shall we owe
 When He from high looks down on us below?

Jasper

Dear lady...I must say...I don't suppose...

(suddenly growing angry)

No, no! I know what I have known today.

Come! Pay up or be hanged! Mistaken, eh?

What makes me so mistaken, may I ask,

In simply asking you for what I'm owed?

Marguerite

A plague on you, you loud-mouthed lunatic!

It's clear your mind has lost all clarity

And you are stumbling in a mist of error.

(Marguerite shoves Jasper so vigorously that he staggers)

Indeed, you are demented, quite insane!

Oh, were I not a female, slender, frail,

And quite devoid of brute ability,

(she shoves him again)

I'd bravely bind you up for you're quite mad.

Jasper *(regaining his balance)*

I must insist you pay! I must! I must!

Marguerite *(advancing on him)*

Oh, such a sterling way for you to act,

So suitable for such a man of stature:

Wild-shouting loud and moon-touched accusations

As if to carry to the clouds above.

Jasper *(moving back)*

Well, strike me dead if ever I, again,

Give credit to a customer of mine.

Vulpes (*mockingly in broad Scots*)

Oh, whare ye be, my guid, guid gauld?

I canna, canna mair ye hauld.

An' nae mair, nae mair in my e'e,

Will ye glitter, rit sparklin'ly.

I canna, canna mair ye hauld.

Oh, whare ye be, my guid, guid gauld?

Jasper (*backing further as Vulpes and Marguerite advance on him*)

The dark-souled devil! Why he's sneaking off

Into far regions of the other world

With all my lovely cloth beneath his arm.

Vulpes (*didactically*)

Oh, Renard, red-brushed, vulpine visitant, distant,

On verges of the vision, keeps fine guardians

Of fowl domestic ever vigilant-

Yet on occasion time's spinners favour

Celerity of instant, brash obtrusion.

Jasper (*turning to Marguerite*)

What utter nonsense is he uttering?

Vulpes

Ach, seh' ich Renard, kluges Füchslein!

Jasper

How does he gabble in so many tongues?

It seems the murkiest, strange matter that

I've ever stumbled on- mad-minded frenzy.

Yet by the sun's sane light, I was so certain
 He visited this morning, feverless,
 And full of wit and sense and healthful spirits-
 As whole as any in the seeing day.
 Could he be so transformed before light's eye
 Has even started sinking slowly towards
 The westward line of golden dusk?

Marguerite

Do you

Believe me now at last?

Jasper

I do not know.

But there is surely something most amiss.

Vulpes (*grabbing a broom and using it as a witch's broomstick*)

I'm mad, I'm mad, mad as the mottled moon;
 I'm mad, I'm mad, mad as the rushing broom!
 With pure nonsense sense finds no debate.
 So pray, do not quodlibetificate!
 Kadarabraba, kadarabraba! So!
 A fortiori, a fortiori ! Oh!!!

Jasper

Good lord, he's sinking fast! That spluttering,
 Wild-whirling witchcraft's moony, midnight madness,
 Was certainly no normal speech.

Marguerite

It must

Be near the hour now when the holy father
 Should visit him, I fear, one final time.
 The dreadful clock will strike, the hands will fall,
 And that, for him will be the end of all.

Vulpes (*dashing around*)

Good day, good day, good day, good sir, to you.
 Pray, deliquesce before delirium!
 And oh, good holy pater, how we caper.
 Tell me, good sir, good sir, what is the matter?
 Are you, good sir, just fat and getting fatter?
 So gooselessness is my good comity,
 My thinning help, if you can follow me!
 Ahhhhr!

(Vulpes sinks to the ground with phoney death rattles)

Marguerite (*flinging herself on Jasper*)

By all the sacred powers above- he's dying.
 He's dying now. See, see! His living breath
 Is leaving him. His mouth is frothing so.
 And I shall be alone; left all alone,
 Alone, poor me, alone and sorrowing.

Jasper (*hastily extracting himself*)

I'd best be off before he leaves this life.
 He would not want me witness to the last
 Confession of his sins. Please pardon, please,
 Good lady, I have made some sorry error-
 May God forgive me!

Marguerite

And amen to that.

May God forgive his sorry wife as well.

Jasper (*crossing back to his shop as Marguerite continues to mourn over Vulpes*)

Some pretty puzzle all of this has been.

Perplexing to all sense and reasoning!

He seems, indeed, doomed in grave illness, just

A few, bare inches from that final threshold

That none would willingly be crossing. Yet,

If it be so and he were not the one

Who came by buying but a while ago,

Who was it then? His double as disguise?

He's twinned by none, I'm sure, in all the world.

(Jasper pauses, struck by a sudden idea)

Oh, no! Oh, no! Alas, alas, I know!

For now I think on it I'm sure I've heard

A dark, side whisper on such things- that is

That when some sinner's in his final hours,

The ancient enemy of good may steal

His customary form and walk abroad to add

More final weight to his soul's troubling load,

Thus piling more bad deeds upon his name.

But even if this be an honest tale,

Why choose my mind as victim to deceive,

False-featured in a dying lawyer's form?

I never have been haunted so before;

Nor dogged by demons or dissembling visions.

Although... it could be warning that my craft,

My double-dealing ways, will drag me down!

Well, what the devil's taken let him keep!
 I do not wish to fight him in the deep!
(Jasper exits via his shop, shaking his head)

Vulpes *(bouncing up)*

How's that? We've rid ourselves of one fool draper.
 His mind's so mottled by my seeming madness
 He'll wake as like with nightmares from his sleep,
 And leave us quite alone till later times
 When I've recovered- miracle to sight,
 And vanished cloth has vanished in time's night.

Marguerite *(agreeing)*

Oh, yes. I think that's surely cooked his goose-
 Well done both sides. Was not my part true-played?

Vulpes

It was a fine and natural performance,
 In playing more persuasive than are most
 Upon the creaking stage. Indeed, my dear,
 No clever critic could distinguish it
 From actuality- you acted out
 So smooth a simulacrum of real woe.

(Vulpes looks about carefully)

I do not think we're called for curtain call,
 And so we take our own performing fee-
 The cloth for clothes for both of us for free!

(Vulpes takes the bundle from under the bed and tosses it to Marguerite. Pulling a curtain to hide the interior, they exit.)

ACT THREE SCENE ONE

An hour or so later. Lights dim. Slight musical interlude (Renaissance or Medieval lute would be possible). Lights come up.

Jasper before his shop.

Jasper *(to himself)*

All lies, deception, fraud, and trickery;
 I'm just quite overwhelmed- no!- drowned by falsehoods!
 It's open house on all my property,
 And every devil saunters in and takes
 Whatever catches fancy's eye. I seem
 Catastrophe's own king, the emperor
 Of woes, misfortune's very majesty.
 For first I find that some shape-stealing fiend,
 Some profit-lifting and unpaying spectre,
 Purloins my precious cloth and vanishes,
 Perhaps, who knows, to burn it in deep hell.
 Then what fate follows on? Now I uncover
 What soft suspicion murmured to me true-
 That even my own shepherd steals from me,
 He whom I've ever paid quite well... oh, well,
 He whom I've mostly paid. Yes, even he
 Has turned to hidden treachery, no doubt
 Advantaged by my trust. But he, by heaven,
 Shall not escape from this unscathed! He'll pay!
 I'll pour the law's full fury on his head.
 He'll curse the day that he conceived deceit!
 Oh, yes, indeed! Yes, he shall curse the day!

(William the Shepherd enters)

William

Good afternoon, good afternoon to you,
My goodly master. Bless you, dear, old master.

Jasper

So shepherd, you are here, you low sheep-stealer.
What have you to confess about your crimes-
The disappearing of my precious fleeces?

William

Beg pardon, sir. It is about... about,
About some things this fellow said to me.
He said you sent him as...what was it now?..
A bailiff... that was what it was. He was
A rather wild, untidy fellow, sir,
He gabbled something that I didn't catch
In all clear fullness of its proper meaning-
A lot about you, master, and a thing
He called, I think it was, a summons, sir.
He kept on babbling, Lord knows what he meant,
About the court, about your sheep, and what
You had been saying, Master.

Jasper

Yes, I sent

The bailiff with a summons for your sins.
I've caught you with your catch and now the court
Can catch the tale of your sly guilt. Prepare
To face the righteous wrath of law's revenge!
You won't forget this lesson in a long time!

I'll teach you to take cloth... I mean to say,
To steal my sheep.

William

Good master, sir,
What's this about some cloth? I seem to see
Some stinging thorn has angered and annoyed you:
I'm scared to speak, so stormy is your gaze.

Jasper

You bother me! Be gone! But just remember,
You wolf in shepherd's dress, you wild dog's whelp,
To drag your sorry hide to court at four.

William

But surely we can settle this alone,
Good master mine. What use are courts to us?

Jasper

Be off! Be gone! There is no more to add.
A wise, clear judge can do the settling now.
I cannot let such guilt pass lightly by!
If I do not stand firm, a proud defender,
Repulsing all attacks from frauds and swindlers,
I'll surely end the laughing stock of town.

(Jasper storms back into his shop and exits)

William *(to himself)*

My master is now past appeal to peace.
His single mood's a frenzy of revenge.

I'd best scout round to find defence and arm
 My worth with someone else's sturdy words.
 Now let me think! What lawyer's near and known
 For cunning craft and clear, bold speaking? Yes!
 The hire that I seek's not far to find.
 I know the one to fit the form. I'll see
 If master Vulpes will speak up for me.
(William starts to cross towards Vulpes' house)

ACT THREE SCENE TWO

The same. William crossing over to Vulpes' house.

William *(singing to himself)*

The singing of the stars on high,
 The truth that's in a liar's eye,
 A ghost's footstep, the hammer blow
 Of sunlight falling on the snow-
 May these, the sounds of silence, teach
 My master how to give his speech!
 May every sense his mind conceives
 Turn nonsense in the words he weaves;
 May every syllable become
 A trick to trip his troubled tongue-
 May shifting meaning in each word
 Make all his meanings sound absurd!

(William reaches Vulpes' house. He knocks on the door.)

Hello! Hello! Is anyone at home?

Vulpes *(within)*

Oh, hell's black horses! He's returned once more!

Marguerite

We must act now, upon the instant's chance!

Vulpes

Go open up. I'll be abed and dead!

(Vulpes lies stiffly on the bed pretending to be dead)

Marguerite

And I'll be dumb from grief's great reckoning.

William *(with a short bow as she opens the door)*

The Lord be with you, mistress!

Marguerite

Oh... and you,

(Marguerite speaks loudly so Vulpes can hear)

My fine, young friend. What is it you are wanting?

(Vulpes gets up, and comes cautiously to the door, behind Marguerite)

William *(pointing to Vulpes)*

I wish to speak to him, in truth. Good sir,

A fellow came and said they'd fine me if

I did not come to court this afternoon.

Would you, good sir, come and defend me, for

I know but nothing of such things? Although

My clothes seem ragged, sir, I've money by.

Vulpes (*coming out*)

Well, money speaks when poverty is dumb.
 For it can ever find a good defender
 Whose gleaming eloquence is born from gold.
 I'm sure we'll rightly reckon some arrangement.
 Now firstly we'll discuss in depth of detail
 The tricks and turns within wild circumstance
 That caused this false and sudden accusation
 That you are bravely facing, seeking fairness.

Marguerite (*to Vulpes*)

I'll leave you to your facts and figuring,
 But mind you use your mind to work a way
 With cleverness to carry off the day!

Vulpes (*kissing her goodbye as she exits*)

Dear wife, I'll try to keep your counsel well.

(to William)

Now set before me your whole, guiltless story.

William (*cautiously*)

I've fallen into trouble with... a man,
 You understand. I've kept his sheep for years.
 I took them to fresh pastures every day
 And cared for them and watched for sudden peril,
 In every wind and weather of the world.
 He didn't pay me well, and so, you see...

Vulpes

Yes, yes.

William

One day, in spite, I sold a pair.
I told him they had died of foul disease.

Vulpes (*adopting an air of court speech*)

Provoked, of course, by petty parsimony-
Harsh poverty of pay. What happened next?

William (*momentarily distracted by Vulpes' display*)

What happened next? Oh, yes, of course.
He said, "Don't leave their bodies near the rest.
Get rid of them." Well, that's just what I'd done;
And quite a pleasing penny they'd provided.
What else? Well, after that it grew to be
A habit with me, sir. I'd sell a sheep
And tell my master truly it had gone,
Neglecting, shall I say, full-honest reason.

Vulpes (*thoughtfully*)

Oh, yes, I see.

William

Well, finally, in fact,
Unfolding boldness led to foolish greed
And overcame my care. Too frequent were
The failures of the flock to seem chance fate.
My master grew to doubt my doubtful tales
And in suspicion set a secret watch,
From time to hidden time- a guard upon
My guarding rule. Thus came it so in time
That I, one sorry time, was seen to sin

And my misdeeds informed my master's ear.
 So overall my thought is this: if I
 Can pave your palm with coins, I'm sure that we
 Could steal the seeming credit from his case
 And leave him with a poverty of truth,
 Too little left to catch clear, legal judgement.
 I know he holds the right, but I believe
 That your quick wits could twist it from his grasp.

Vulpes (*with a smile*)

I do believe that is a tested truth-
 My wit has won a way in many trials.
 Thus, with a good assurance, I can say
 That I shall find a path. What will you give
 If I turn justice round and find release?

William

How do a few, gold pieces sound, good Master?

Vulpes (*eagerly*)

In broadest terms, you know, you bring a brave
 And excellent, clear case indeed! You see
 The stronger an opponent's case appears
 To simple sight at first, the weaker I
 Can make it seem, reflected strangely in
 The bright but bending mirror of my words.
 Just let him tell his tale of woe, I'll find
 Reply to make him pause and others wonder.

William

But how can you be sure of that, good Master?

Vuples

Come listen near. I sense you have the sense
 To comprehend. Life's real occurrence
 Is not itself full-present in retelling
 And so can be discredited to others.
 For even evidence and first report
 Can be assigned another sense of things
 As long as you can forge the key to turn
 Plain meaning to another meaning's purpose.
 So often times a clever stratagem,
 Cool, crafty manner in the representing,
 Quite overwhelms a fair and free but feeble
 Expression of the truth. But what's your name?

William

The shepherd, William, sir... or William Shepherd.

Vulpes

Well, William Shepherd, I would guess
 That you have harvested, as you explained,
 Some many sheep from your mean master's flock?

William

About, say, thirteen in three years or so.

Vulpes (*thoughtfully*)

You felt they were a bonus on poor wages,
 Necessities you garnered for survival.
 Yes, yes, it's flowing finely; smoothly shaping.
 And by the way, good William, do you think

That he can pull from his back pocket some
Well-trusted witnesses to testify?
This is a pertinent and telling point.

William

To testify. Oh, I should say he will-
He'll have a dozen witnesses at least.

Vulpes

Yes, yes, I see: that paints a darker picture.
But let us not let dread discouragement
Undo our daring and our clear resolve.
For all in all, when all is rightly weighed,
All that it means is this: we find the key
That opens his locked case and spills the contents
With such untidiness that all seems error,
A mess of false and random allegations,
Before he gets a chance to call upon
His plausible and many-voiced support.

William

But how can you do that? For I am sure
He'll wish to use all witness for his cause.

Vulpes

Oh, well, if that's the way the breeze is blowing,
It does, perhaps, call for a change in tack.
So William Shepherd, we shall weave a plot,
Original enough to serve our course.
Let's see- there must be something-let me think!

(thinking aloud)

A simple shepherd, that old judge, an angry
 Accuser- yes, there must be something... something...
 There must be something now... a simple shepherd...
 Yes, yes! Good Mercury has keened my mind
 With wild quicksilver lightning's power! Listen-
 Hear this, my plan. Now firstly I'll pretend
 I've not met you before; in fact, that I'm
 Quite unacquainted with your person's form.

William

Good Lord, good master, is that wise?

Vulpes

Don't fret!

It's part of my bold-arching plan. Now next,
 If you but utter any words at all,
 He'll find a fault, a contradiction there.
 Indeed, all statements are the very devil,
 Especially when one is, now how to put it,
 As far removed from likely innocence
 As is a goat among ripe cabbages,
 A hungry fox inspecting well-fed hens.
 And this, I fear, is more than ever so
 When seeking certain, firm defence against
 A charge of strongly-witnessed felony.

William

But how shall silence help my case, good Master?
 Shall I not be more swiftly found in guilt?

Vulpes

It's not in silence we shall seek salvation;
 Although it does remain the case one fights
 In peril if, quite inadvertently,
 One ever offers factual response.
 No, you must never speak a purposed word-
 A single syllable whose sense could slip
 Past your unguarded lips to highlight sin.
 Thus when you there are called upon to speak
 Before the court, you must reply, straight-faced,
 With simple sheepish bleating... like your beasts.

William

With simple sheepish bleating like my beasts?

Vulpes

Yes, yes. Whatever's said you answer: "Baa!"
 I'll say, with all of seeming innocence,
 "I do not know this simple fellow, but
 It shines quite clearly, like discerning day,
 He's just a homespun idiot who thinks
 He is conversing with his animals,
 Communing with those citizens of nature."
 And even if they reel with anger, still
 Say nothing but: "Baa, baaa!" You comprehend?

William

I grasp your great idea. I shall do so:
 For every answer nothing but a "baa."
 Yes, as a simple fool I can't be felt
 Responsible for reckless deeds.

Vulpes

That's right.

Look sharp. Be watchful, still- and steady-minded.
 Keep cool and level in your heart's own feeling.
 Remember that no matter what they state
 You shall but answer with a plain-put "baaa!"

William

Oh yes, oh yes, good Master. I can see
 With clear, sure mind what I shall do. No bold
 And earnest question, chiding name or insult,
 No driven words, no shout, no push, no probing,
 No speech of any other sort at all,
 From you or any other will get more.

Vulpes

We've chanced, I think, upon a pretty trick.
 We'll snatch you from the jaws of justice yet.
 Another matter, by brief way, be sure
 My money's ready for me when it's due.

William

Of course, good Master. By all we take as true,
 I'll have your payment ready, never fear.

Vulpes

We move as one on every twist and turn!
 Yes, like two halves of one strong mouth, we'll snap
 And gobble up the gall of troubling fact!
 The breeze be in our heels. We've deeds to do

And little time to take. So see your dress
 Is simple, suitable to seem a fool,
 And be a trifle late. Our precious plan
 Requires that I'm first, you follow later;
 We must not seem, in any way, together.

William

I'll race off like a storm's wild wind and find
 Some ragged clothes to clothe my simple mind.

(William exits hurriedly)

Vulpes

And I must polish my appearing too
 And woo respect with touch of richer rag.
 I wonder if that cloak we started cutting
 Could measure up in time? I'll check that chance
 With Marguerite, whose skill is strong in this;
 For it may be that there may be a way.

(Marguerite enters)

Marguerite

How did it flow? Has your wit spun a cloak
 To keep him from cruel winds of accusation?

Vulpes

Indeed it has, dear wife. Indeed it has.
 But now, to call on cloaks, I wonder if
 We could form one to please the legal eye?

Marguerite

The time is short but if we work with will
I'm sure we can bring something to completion.

Vulpes (*rubbing his hands*)

I'll fetch the cloth for our creation's prize.
It may not rain with golden coins today-
But if all's well, we'll get a pair as pay.

(Vulpes exits into his house)

Marguerite (*alone*)

Well, now the furtive fox is in full flight
And finds its prey back in abundance now.
It seems this day that that rare visitor,
Sweet opportunity, has come to call
Not once but twice, and so, to greet him well,
I'll cloak my dear in newly gained respect-
For something newly pleasing to sight's pleasure
Can magnify a man to higher measure.

(Marguerite exits, thoughtfully)

ACT FOUR SCENE ONE

Late afternoon. Music to mark time's passing. Vulpes enters dressed in a new blue hat and cloak. This can be front of curtain or in a spot as the scene is changed if necessary.

Vulpes (*to himself, examining his attire*)

My wife of craft, my Marguerite's a marvel.

Not one could ever raise dispute on that.
 When time was twirling to a shortened measure,
 Her nimble fingers danced to faster tunes.
 For she not only speeded cloak's creation,
 So splendid, long, fine-flowing as it is,
 But swifter than a stumbling speech could stitch
 Description of the act, the deed was done,
 And she, excelling any expectation,
 Has formed as well this excellent, fine hat,
 Completing thus a rapid, full provision
 For new appearance in my old profession.

ACT FOUR SCENE TWO

The scene opens and lights come up. We discover the judge's bench, centre back. A stool is down stage left and another middle stage right. Vulpes strolls down to the left stool and sits.

Vulpes

So I am first, before the general crowd,
 With grace of time to don mind's armoured might;
 Lift up my luminary shield of words
 And wield the shining sword of sharpened wit...

(He pauses)

Well, so speaks pride perhaps, still I expect
 I shall not have much fighting, heavy-hard;
 I'm sure this battle will be easy-won.
 For, as I thought, our man is that old fool,
 Judge Jeeble of uncertain, forceful judgement.

(Judge Jeeble enters. Vulpes rises. He takes off his hat)

God bless your Honour this good afternoon,

And may He grant you all your heart desires.
 May He provide prosperity and health,
 And bless you with abiding fortune's fullness,
 And speed all worthy plans to sweet completion.
 For surely Justice is entirely safe
 When weighed with care in your most patient hands.

Judge Jeeble

You're welcome, master Vulpes. Pray, sit down.
(Vulpes sits. Judge Jeeble leans towards him)
 What prompts appearing here this afternoon?
 Have you some busy case to bring before me?

Vulpes

I have no slippery problem to pursue,
 No knotty matter to undo, Your Honour;
 Indeed, no purpose but to look and learn,
 To watch, attentive in humility,
 The workings of true wisdom as revealed
 In all your Honour's just and reasoned judgements.

Judge Jeeble *(with a slight cough)*

Yes quite. Indeed. Then you may sit and study...
 And may I say, in all due modesty,
 To view should bring a benefit to those
 Who wish discovery of law's great depths.

Vulpes

As usual, Your Honour sums the matter
 With penetrating and succinct precision.

*(Vulpes sits. Seeing Jasper enter stage right, he quickly conceals his shock.
Meanwhile, the judge is arranging his papers)*

Vulpes *(aside, in a whisper)*

Oh, hell and heavy weather brewing up!
How unforeseen, a change can turn the tale
And sudden danger dash all hopeful plans,
Reducing reason's architecture to
A pile of rubble with an instant blow!
Why did I not demand that shepherd give
His master's proper name! I could have known,
I should have known; in truth, I would have known
That Jasper is his vengeance-minded master,
May curses rain on his arraigning head!

(Vulpes tries to hide his face under his hat)

Judge Jeeble *(banging his gavel)*

This session of the court is sitting now.
If anyone has matters here today,
Please bring them forth at once. I wish no wasting
Of public time and money at this bench.
Besides, I want to take my dinner early.

Jasper *(bowing slightly)*

My counsel's coming soon, Your Honour, sir,
Some minor but inevitable muddle,
Some bit of bother not to be put off,
Has just delayed him for the merest moment;
And so, Your Honour, I would be so grateful
If we could wait a minute longer for him.

Judge Jeeble

I'm sorry, but I cannot alter custom.
 The law does not digest delay; it dines
 At its appointed hour, not trading time
 To make convenience for tardy minds.

(William, looking shabby, enters over near Vulpes. The judge produces an hourglass which he turns over and places on the bench)

And so I'll waste no running sands in wait,
 For we have but late afternoon's brief leave
 To balance and to settle all affairs,
 Here in this town and its far-farming lands.
 Hence not to be too wordy in my weighing,
 I make immediate my judgement's worth,
 (I've already mentioned once) and call
 For all of you to reckon readiness.
 Indeed, in all my time upon this bench
 I've never favoured those who plead delay,
 Nor those who waste the court's small-given hours
 With pompous and pontificating speeches
 And obfuscate with false elaboration,
 Propounding this, expounding that, as though
 To speak at great unnecessary length
 Were guarantee of rightful victory...
 As if the very weight of gathered words
 Must sway the scales of justice in their favour...
 Ah, yes. Oh, let me see. Where were we now?

Jasper (*helpfully*)

Not wasting time, Your Honour, sir.

Judge Jeeble (*banging his gavel again*)

That's so!

Thus, let us hear your matter straight away.

You are, in fact, the plaintiff, I presume?

Jasper

That is of truth, Your Honour, sir. I am.

Judge Jeeble

Who stands defendant, to deny your charge?

Jasper (*pointing to William*)

Your Honour, that's the fellow I'm accusing.

He's still and silent, trying to put on

Pretence of simple-minded innocence,

Like some lost lamb that lingers by the fence.

Yet he has done much wrong to ponder on;

And rather is a ravening, wild wolf

Whom I mistook for tame, flock-guarding hound.

Judge Jeeble

Enough! He is not guilty till true law

Pronounces such to be his doom. Proceed.

Since you're both present, state your case.

Jasper (*with a bow*)

Well, as Your Honour wishes so, I shall

Proceed to take the matter to myself,

As now it seems my counsel's late and lost.
 No matter, I shall make clear meaning shine...
 I wish to charge him with all this... (Where is
 That paper? Ah, yes, here it is.)

(Jasper rummages around in his pockets and produces a paper. He reads.)

As it
 Is seen as true before both God and man,
 This thief, this scheme-rich and fleece-scrounging scoundrel,
 Whom I've assisted since he was a suckling,
 Whom I have ever paid for honest labour,
 Was put in charge of half my precious flock,
 And he has made such secret selling that...

Judge Jeeble *(interrupting)*

To speak it clearly- did you always pay
 Set wages for his shepherding of sheep?
 That is, was it a right-inscribed agreement
 To which you both agreeably agreed?

Jasper *(puzzled)*

Agreeably agreed, Your Honour, sir?

Vulpes

Your Honour, if I may suggest a way...

Jasper *(recognizing Vulpes)*

The heavens strike me blind if it be not
 The very man I want! It's you- yes, yes!
 My eyes are witness to that open truth,
 No shadow doubt obscures this- it's you!

Oh, see, just see- he's even wearing it!

Judge Jeeble (*looking over to Vulpes who is holding his hand to his face, trying to conceal himself*)

What? What? He's even wearing what?... Dear me,
 Good master Vulpes, gripping grief appears
 This instant to have fastened on your face.
 You seem attacked by sudden slash of pain.
 Have you been waylaid by that grim assassin
 Who stabs the tender mouth when least expected:
 The dreaded toothache?

Vulpes

Truth to tell, Your Honour,
 I find myself caught by a trying pain.
 But I shall find a cure. Let's proceed.

Judge Jeeble (*to Jasper*)

End off your story. Keep to clarity;
 Like crystal waters in a placid lake
 Through which we view the basis of your cause.

Jasper (*excitedly*)

It's him, it's him, I say. It's him, I know,
 And no one else. He is no spectred shape,
 No demon from the shadow deep. Oh, no;
 He is of solid form, the one who stole
 My cloth, who stole my seven yards, my good,
 My good, good yards of finest, bluest cloth!

Judge Jeeble (*to Vulpes*)

What is he saying? What is this about
Good yards of cloth?

Vulpes (*shaking his head*)

I cannot guess, Your Honour.

His frantic words are filled with wild confusion,
Like storm-stripped leaves whirled through the tearing air.
He seems to lack the plain ability
To find clear meaning in this mind or speech.

Jasper (*grabbing Vulpes by the sleeve*)

He's wearing it, Your Honour, don't you see?
May I be taken for a long-eared ass
If he is not the one!

Vulpes (*shaking himself free*)

What are you saying?

The one, the one of what, you raving fool?
What will this madder-by-the-minute man
Be claiming next in his speech-firing frenzy?
And yet, and yet I think I do discern
A tiny, gleaming grain of meaning here-
This muddle-minded fellow, so it seems,
Believes this shepherd stole some wool from which
This cloth that I am wearing has been woven.

Jasper

Just tie me up and lead me to dry straw,
If it's not true, as I stand truly here,
That you...that you have got it all yourself!

Judge Jeeble (banging his gavel)

Stop! Stop! We must have silence in this court,
So sense and point can reappear from it,
Replacing all confusion of loud speech.

(There is silence and the judge looks around)

Now that brings better harmony of mind-
A better order for our further finding.

(Judge Jeeble turns to Jasper)

Hear my command: just try to cease this witless,
Wild wandering from your tale's telling way.
Don't waste fair time with mad irrelevance.

Vulpes

Your Honour's pardon, but, for all my aching,
I cannot keep from smiling just a little
To see such tanglings of absurdity.
For like some comic seeking laughter's praise,
He has so muddled up, in mad confusion,
The clear narration of his case, I'm led
To wonder if it brings a point at all.
Yet if, like Theseus, we seek a thread,
A single strand to guide us wisely through
The rambling labyrinth of his strange thought,
With its most monster-hearted accusations,
It seems that it must be to do with sheep.

Judge Jeeble

Quite right! Quite right! Let us return to sheep.
What happened next?

But nonetheless, it seems to me that we
 Might drive a straighter, swifter way into
 The hidden core of this entangled quarrel
 If, by your leave, we were I allowed to try
 Examination of the shepherd's story
 And see the viewpoint of the so-accused.

Judge Jeeble

Good. Very good. A fine suggestion that
 May bring sweet sense to bitter chaos. Proceed.

(to Jasper)

You may be seated, silently for now.

Jasper

But, but, Your Honour, sir....

Judge Jeeble

At once! Sit down!

(Jasper sits)

Perhaps this shepherd's tale will spin more sense.

Come here, good fellow.

(Judge beckons William)

Give your point of view.

(William comes forward)

Well, speak!

William *(as if puzzled)*

Baa, baaa!

Judge Jeeble *(banging his gavel)*

What's this? What's this? Do I

Hear rightly now? Did he say "baa"? Now look,
No fooling now. Come, clearly speak.

William (*forthrightly*)

Baa, baaaa!

Judge Jeeble

You'd better not be making fun of us.
I shall not tolerate disdain for all
That rightly stands embodied in this court.
So do not think that you can play the fool
Or I'll have you in irons for your contempt!

William (*cringing*)

Baa, baa!

Judge Jeeble (*banging his gavel*)

Enough of all this anarchy!
I will not have law's honoured institution
Mocked by some madcap, hayseed jest.

Vulpes (*hurriedly*)

Perhaps,
Perhaps, Your Honour, if I may suggest,
That that may be in no way his intent.
It's rather, I suspect, that he was born
Without the basic wit for normal life.
And in this witless state he's grown an exile
To human company and comprehension;
And so, while even standing in this place,
He thinks he's still among his rams and ewes.

Jasper (*turning to Vulpes*)

You! You! What utter nonsense you are mouthing!

You took my cloth! You stole my splendid cloth!

Your Honour, sir, you don't know what a trick...

Judge Jeeble (*banging his gavel again*)

Be quiet! Quiet! What? Are you raving mad?

You have been ordered more than once. Forget

This mania that's fastened on some cloth.

Jasper (*excitedly*)

Most humbly do I beg Your Worship's pardon.

It's only that this whole, well-schemed deception

So fills my heart with fierce, fierce anger's fire

All other thoughts are scorched to ash. If I

Let him escape today, Your Honour, sir,

He'll find some way, some underhanded means,

To slip the net and so get off quite free!

You see, Your Honour, sir, as I have said

Already more than once, I gave him cloth...

(Judge Jeeble lifts his gavel)

All right, that is, about the stolen sheep,

I beg your pardon, sir...this crafty fellow,

Who's suddenly decided he's struck dumb,

This shepherd who was meant to shield from harm,

And then he said he'd surely pay me later,

No, what I mean is that the shepherd here

Has been three years...he said, good, golden coins,

No, he had sworn to guard the flock and do

No mischief... yes, if I came to his house...

Oh, what I mean to say is that they're going
 To get away with all of it- the cloth,
 The coins, the sheep, denying everything...
 Just look at master Vulpes there, I swear
 He's grinning to himself in secret now,
 I mean, he sold the sheep and took the coins...
 And when he had the cloth he hurried off
 And said that I should come and share some goose.

Judge Jeeble

A goose? A goose? There's not a thread of reason,
 In all this raving, ranting carry-on!
 I mean, what does he mean? First it's all cloth,
 And then it's sheep, and where do gold coins fit?

Vulpes

I'm sure the trouble is that he holds back
 This poor and simple shepherd's rightful wages.

Jasper

You'd better shut your lying mouth! Oh, no-
 Not you, Your Honour, sir! I want my cloth,
 I want my cloth or money! You and I,
 Yes, you and I know where the shoe is pinching.

Judge Jeeble

What shoe is this?

Jasper

Oh, nothing, sir, I'm sorry.

But he's the greatest cheat you'd ever find

In all your living days... I mean, Your Honour,
I'll do my best to keep quite quiet.

Judge Jeeble

We do

Not want your silence. We want your story, told
In plain simplicity and ordered sense.

Jasper

I'll do my best to keep to one clear line...

Vulpes (*interrupting hastily*)

Now at this point may I point out, your Honour,
That this young shepherd here should still be able
To help illuminate the dim confusion
Which veils the tale of this demented draper.
However, it seems clear this simple shepherd
Cannot reply with reasoned clarity
Without the careful aid of guiding counsel.
Now be this pleasing to Your Honour, sir,
I would be truly glad to proffer help,
To spark in him true speech, encouraging
A calm and clear relating of his case.

Judge Jeeble

Help him? I doubt if there's much profit there.

Vulpes

It's not the clink of coins that I am after.
It's just to see true justice done, Your Honour.
I'm sure the poor fool needs assistance if

He is to answer in a rational
And normal, sense-related manner here.

Judge Jeeble

All right. By all that's sane, give it a try.
We're heading down the road to reason's ruin
By following our present course.

Vulpes

My thanks,

Your Honour. So I shall proceed. Come here,
My simple friend. Come, give a plain reply-
You comprehend why you are here in court?

William (*shaking his head*)

Baa! Baaa!

Vulpes

Now listen! Hear and have clear answer.

So what does "baa" betoken? Are you trying
To say a word but can't get past the start?
To barter in barbaric barbs or bask
In barbers' barley baskets- all start so.
Is any one of these the word you're wanting?

William (*loudly*)

Baa! BAAA!

Vulpes

All right, all right! Be calm! Attempt
To tell the court and our good judge all that

Occurred to cast you in your current case.

William (*mournfully*)

Baa!

Vulpes

What's all this "baaing" all about? Are you
Alive up there, up there beneath your hair?

William (*questioningly*)

Baa? Baa?!

Vulpes

You think you're still out in the fields,
Beneath the gentle sun and free, blue sky,
Among your softly-grazing flocks?

William (*softly*)

Baa, baa.

Vulpes

Come, simply answer yes or no.

William (*soberly*)

Baa. Baa.

Vulpes

Now listen- did you sell some sheep or not?

William (*earnestly*)

Baa, baaa!

Vulpes

Whatever are you saying now?

Now surely you don't think we're shaggy rams?

Be warned. Our judge is sharp and shrewd and not

Some sleepy, woolly-headed, sheepish beast.

Speak up! Speak up!

William (*loudly*)

Baa! Baa! BAA! BAA! BAAA! BAAA!

Vulpes

The man's completely bleating mad, Your Honour.

It's evident he's kept sole company

With speechless rams and ewes for far too long;

And like the changeable chameleon

Whose outer hue grows true to its surroundings,

As green to leaf or brown to rough-barked trunk,

So he has grown to think and speak in sheep.

He's even crazier than the crazy draper

Who senselessly wild-spins wild accusations,

And who has brought a crazy case against

A fellow even madder than he is!

Judge Jeeble

Stop! Stop! It's quite enough to split one's skull!

Vulpes

Your Honour, may I recommend this shepherd

May just as well return to mind his flock.

It would appear to any observation,

That weighs behaviour with a sober sense,
 That he is not a person of sound mind
 Who may be held responsible for all
 His actions as true-reason-guided deeds.
 We'll get no more from him- a total fool.

Jasper (*furiously*)

A total fool is he? By all that's holy,
 He's sharper-witted than you are yourself.

Vulpes

May I just say, Your Honour, if it's useless
 And hateful to harass a half-wit, then
 Far more may it be said in this sad instance.
 Thus to interrogate and sternly press
 For clear-set answers that can't be returned
 Is far, far crueller with a quarter-wit,
 Like this poor, feeble-minded shepherd here.

Jasper (*to Judge Jeeble*)

Is he to leave before you hear my case
 And rightly validate my valid cause?

Judge Jeeble

Since he is feeble-minded, yes- why not?

Jasper

But surely you will hear my case, Your Honour?
 For simple justice asks- demands you should.
 I may have seemed confusion's very child
 But that was not through malice or deception

Upon my part but rather rascal-breath,
 Through boldly-spoken, plausible deceit
 That bars admission of the basic truth,
 Has so upset my sense and stable speaking
 That I have not explained my case at all.

Judge Jeeble

No more of this mad, idiotic prattle!
 This argument of fools is quite enough
 To burst one's brain. Now listen here, if you
 Come butting in once more I'll clear the court.

Jasper

Then you'll dismiss my simple, honest plea?
 And you'll not listen to my case again?

Judge Jeeble

What, what! Take heed of warning given. You
 Are trespassing upon last patience now.

Vulpes

And if it please Your Honour, I object.
 He wants to draw us by the nose through all
 His reasonless, wild rigmarole again.
 This shepherd is, Your Honour, there's no doubt,
 The fullest fool you'd ever chance upon;
 And this, his madman master, muddles all.

Jasper

And what about my cloth? You're just... not honest!

Vulpes

He's growing madder with each passing minute.

Jasper

I recognize your voice, your clothes, your face.

I'm really very sane, Your Honour, sir.

Just let me straighten out this crooked story.

Vulpes

I must advise your silence. You've been warned.

I wonder that you do not blush with shame

To bring this case of false, wild accusations,

This litany of crazy lies, against

A harmless son of earth's simplicity.

Why, even just suppose, suppose for sake

Of purely-illustrative argument,

He sold a sick, decrepit ewe, not worth

A couple of brass pennies, what of that?

He's earned the worth of that and plenty more

While watching sheep in every weather known,

In fearless guard against ice blizzard's rage

And stealth and fury of night-hunting wolves.

Jasper

You see, you see, Your Honour? Do you see?

I speak of cloth and he replies with sheep.

Where is the cloth you spirited away?

Vulpes

What! Would you choose to wrap a man in chains

For one old mangy fleece? Be calm, man, calm.
 This violent animosity against
 A poor, weak simpleton who may have made
 One honest error, ill becomes you here.

Jasper

The devil must have prompted me to sell
 My lovely cloth to such a cunning cheat!
 Your Honour, I demand...

Judge Jeeble (*banging his gavel*)

I acquit the man!

And I forbid you further prosecution.
 What has this witless world of ours become?
 Preferring charges against an imbecile-
 A ridicule and right absurdity!
 If you're so poor-informed of your own trade
 That you permit a mindless idiot
 To labour for your profit and increase,
 You must digest the fated consequence.

(*to William*)

You may go back now to your flock.

William (*with delight*)

Baaa! BAAA!

Judge Jeeble (*to Jasper*)

And you have shown the sort of man you are!

Jasper

But sir, I only wish...

Judge Jeeble

Be quiet, by heaven,
Or I shall lay a charge on you myself.

Jasper (*pointing to Vulpes*)

But, but Your Honour, sir, Your Honour, sir,
This is the man I really wish to charge;
His clever chatter's cheated me, Your Honour.

Vulpes

I really don't know why he's raving on.
I hardly know the man; and I recall
No act of mine that's done him injury.
I must suppose that he has caught a mania
For prosecuting people...and, just having
Lost victim one he's trying for another.

Jasper

You're such a liar! Sir, just let me speak...

Judge Jeeble

Oh, very amusing, I must say! Must you
Forever rave so, flaming with confusion-
Your wretched racket battering our ears?

(Judge Jeeble rises)

And so, good day to one and all. And now
I'm going home.

(speaking to William)

Be off, poor friend. You're free.
You are acquitted. Do you understand?

William (*nodding*)

Baa, baa.

Vulpes

I think he's giving thanks, Your Honour.

Judge Jeeble (*to Vulpes*)

Both muddled, mad, impossible, you know.

Jasper

Is this, this justice? Your Honour, sir, I beg...

Judge Jeeble

Enough, enough! My dinner's waiting! You
Grow tedious like some annoying fly
Whose buzzing path disturbs the busy brain.
Away! A pox on you! Away! Be gone!
I'm going home! Be off! You bother me!
Come, Vulpes, come and dine with us tonight.

Vulpes (*holding up his hand*)

My toothache, sir. Much as I'm flattered by
Your kind request, I fear you must excuse
My most reluctant, sorrowful refusal.

Judge Jeeble (*gathering his papers*)

Yes, yes, of course. Well, parting let me give
All thanks for bringing order to this bedlam.

Vulpes (*bowing*)

A simple pleasure; but I must object
And say: Your Honour's wisdom was true cause.

Judge Jeeble

Well, well. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps it's so.
The clearer eyes will always find the light;
The wiser mind will always reach the right!

(Judge Jeeble exits)

Jasper

You thief! You low, conniving double-dealer!

Vulpes

I think, dear sir, you have mistaken me
For someone else, less reputable... perhaps
You're thinking of my twin, my double, Lupus.
Sometimes, in fun, he borrows name and figure,
But he's a swindler; I'm a lawyer, sir.

Jasper

Don't think you've heard the last of this, you dog!
I'll find some way to pay you back in kind!

(to himself)

And in the future I'll be less inclined
To grasp with greed each seeming chance I find.

(Jasper exits)

Vulpes

Farewell, old feather-brain! Well now, good William,
Did I not serve you proudly now?

William (*enthusiastically*)

Baa, baaa!

Vulpes

There is no need to go on bleating now,
For you can shed the sheepish show, you know.
We spun a pretty devious defence
And made tough, binding rope from slender thread.
Was not my counsel most successful?

William (*nodding*)

Baaaa!

Vulpes

No one can hear us now. No need for fear.
Resume your claim as reason's creature here.
Discard the beastly noises of pretence.
You can regain the wonder power of speech-
So marvellous for indicating truth,
So useful for concealing it as well.

William (*shrugging*)

Baa, baa!

Vulpes

Well, as you will. It's time for me
To lift my heels and head for home. Perhaps

You'd like to settle this and pay my fee.

William (*in pain*)

Baaa! BAAA!

Vulpes

No, no. There is no need to act

Your part of wordless fooling now! Come! Come!

Cough up a pair of golden, gleaming discs,

Two metal suns, and we are done!

William (*in greater pain*)

BAA! BAAAA!

Vulpes (*coaxingly*)

Now, now; you played your sheepish part with real

Finesse, all solemn-faced and foolish-seeming.

A fine and simple-sounding mimicry

It was indeed! It really had them beaten!

William (*cheerfully*)

Baa, baaa!

Vulpes

Why bleat to me? It's over now.

Let's go and celebrate the swift success

Of our dumbfounded trick, our wordless ruse.

Devour roast goose while downing giddy wine!

What do you say to that?

William (*eagerly*)

Baa, baaa! Baa, baaa!

Vulpes (*angrily*)

Enough performing of your farmyard farce!
 No further fooling now, my bleating friend!
 I have fulfilled my role in our sharp practice
 And now demand we settle and be gone!

William (*puzzled*)

Baa, baa?

Vulpes

By Mercury's light-winged, wise ways,
 Have you forgotten all the help I've given?
 Ungrateful wretch! I'll have your stinking hide!

William (*pretending to cringe*)

Baa, baaa!

Vulpes

Enough of all this sheepishness!
 If you think this is some strange, rustic joke,
 The fun is finished now- you've had your laugh.
 So just regain your reason and your speech
 And pay me what I'm truly owed.

William (*shaking his head*)

Baa, baaa!

Vulpes

By all the powers above us and below,
 You sneaking, underhanded, little thief!
 I'll have the bailiff on you right away!

William

Good master, surely you'd not prosecute
 A poor and harmless simpleton, would you?
 That would seem far too mean for even your
 Repute. You cannot go too far, TOO FAR!
 Baa, baa! Baaa, baaa! BAA, BAA! BAAA, BAAA! BAAAA! BAAAA!

(William runs off laughing)

(Vulpes starts to run after William, but thinking better of it, stops)

Vulpes *(staring after him)*

By all that bluffs and bothers and bewilders,
 The rascal's right! I cannot catch him now.

(Vulpes pauses and sighs)

There was a time I fancied that I was,
 Without a single doubt, the lord of cheats
 Of all the regions hereabouts, the king
 Of tricksters, jesters, and all scheming wits.

(with a shrug)

But now a young fox has outfoxed the old.
 Yet I've the cloth and Jasper has no gold.
 And I did win the case, although the pay
 Was not the best that's ever come my way!
 Well, there's an end. The players leave the play;
 Soon night will dawn- then dawn will bring new day.

Now all I need's a way to be discreet
In explanation to my Marguerite.

(Vulpes exits, thinking feverishly)

Lights fade.

THE END

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