

Translated from French

FALSE START AND FALSE FINISH



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Lately, Hubert-le-Fier, lord of Mortelune, is bored in his castle. To distract himself, he decides to organise a race across his vast estate. There's nothing more exciting than a few young men riding together! But what should the reward be? A piece of land? A horse? A purse of gold coins? All these he hold dear. Come on, I have six daughters, the eldest of whom, Jehane, must be old enough to get married. That's our trophy! Dame Aremberge, his wife, wants to protest. Hubert brushed aside her arguments: if Jehane doesn't agree, I'll have her head shaved and send her to a convent.

Three valiant knights were selected: Arthaud-le-Hardi, Brunon-le-Pieux and Conrad-le-Brave. For a laugh, Hubert wanted to add a fourth candidate, a beggar. We'll say that the lord is opening up to the peasants, when, in truth, it's just a matter of being mocked. In the backyards of the castle a guard finds a skinny stable boy called Folquet.
- Put down your dung shovel and follow me!
the soldier orders.

When the day comes, the three gentlemen lead their beautiful horses to the starting line. Folquet joins them, mounted on a shaggy donkey. When the trumpeters raise their

instruments, the donkey takes fright. Without waiting for the music, it bolts down the path. Immediately, the crowd jeers at the cheater who dared to make this blatant false start. They scream. Insults were hurled. They demand justice. Hubert laughs a lot. He orders them to let him go. The trumpets sound. The three valiant men set off and, very quickly, catch up with the pipsqueak.

Arthaud-le-Hardi takes the lead. In the forest of Songecreux, he spots a wolf. Overwhelmed by the idea of killing the wolf, he draws his sword, dismounts his horse and rushes towards the beast. Two metres from the motionless wolf, Arthaud's foot hits a trap whose sharp fangs close on his ankle. His cry of pain echoes all the way to the castle.

Brunon-le-Pieux is leading the race. In the middle of the Devil's Hole, a maze of dark caves, he sees a grimacing spectre. The devil himself! Terrified, he runs away screaming like a piglet. In one fell swoop, he gives up the test, goes home, changes his knickers and left the country.

Conrad-the-Brave, now in first place, rushes into the Beaupré marshes. He meets a peasant woman and asks her for the safest route through these marshes. A kilometre further on, his horse gets stuck in the thick mud that keeps them prisoners.

Folquet is the last to go. Suddenly, two armed bandits appear on the path. The first orders him to get off his donkey, the second to undress.

Behind the drawbridge, the crowd is shouting like never before when the crowd spots Folquet on his donkey, a large hood hiding his face. The dreadful cheat! The redneck of the false start! He dares to claim victory? The women want him to be hang. The men suggest by the feet. Surrounded by the guards, the figure takes off his hood. And, surprise! It's not Folquet, but the youngest daughter.
- It would seem, she said, amused, that no one will marry Jehane.

An hour later, the six sisters were gathered in the great hall: the first was covered with a wolf's skin, the second wears a hideous mask, the third is dressed as a peasant woman and the next two as bandits. Jehane is wearing nothing special, apart from a boastful smile.

Hubert-le-Fier gets red in the face. They ruined his great event! After much swearing and spitting, the lord spits out his favourite threat: if it goes on like this, they'll be shaved and off to the convent. Dame Aremberge intervenes.
- Come on, my good husband, there's no need to be snippy! None of our daughters will shave neither the walls or their hair. You wanted a race to exalt the qualities of body, will and spirit? Admit that these girls are the ones who have served you best!



