

The Head and the Tail of the Serpent

by Jean de La Fontaine

Two parts the serpent has--
Of men the enemies--
The head and tail: the same
Have won a mighty fame,
Next to the cruel Fates;--
So that, indeed, hence
They once had great debates
About precedence.
The first had always gone ahead;
The tail had been for ever led;
And now to Heaven it pray'd,
And said,
"O, many and many a league,
Dragg'd on in sore fatigue,
Behind his back I go.
Shall he for ever use me so?
Am I his humble servant?
No. Thanks to God most fervent!
His brother I was born,
And not his slave forlorn.
The self-same blood in both,
I'm just as good as he:
A poison dwells in me
As virulent as doth
In him. In mercy, heed,
And grant me this decree,
That I, in turn, may lead--
My brother, follow me.
My course shall be so wise,
That no complaint shall rise."
With cruel kindness Heaven granted
The very thing he blindly wanted:
At once this novel guide,
That saw no more in broad daylight
Than in the murk of darkest night,
His powers of leading tried,

Struck trees, and men, and stones, and bricks,
And led his brother straight to Styx.
And to the same unlovely home,
Some states by such an error come.