

THE YOUNG DONKEY

Once upon a time there was a king and a queen who were rich and had all they wanted except that they had no children. The queen bewailed this day and night, saying: 'I am like a field on which nothing grows.' At last God granted her wish, but when the baby was born it didn't look like a human child: it was a little donkey foal. When its mother saw this she began to weep and wail all the more, saying she would rather have had no child at all than a donkey, and telling the servants to throw it in the river for the fish to eat. But the king said: 'No; since God has given it to us it shall be my son and heir, and he shall sit on the royal throne after my death and wear the royal crown.' So the baby donkey was reared and grew up, and his ears grew up nice and straight too. But he was a merry little creature, jumping about and playing, and in particular he was very fond of music; so he went to a famous minstrel and said: 'Teach me your skill and make me able to play the lute as well as you.' 'Oh, my dear little sir,' answered the minstrel, 'I think you would find that difficult: after all, sir, your fingers are not the right shape, they are much too big, and I'm afraid they'd break the strings.' But the donkey wouldn't take no for an answer - play the lute he would and he must; he was patient and worked hard, and learnt in the end to play as well as his master. One day the young gentleman was pensively taking a walk and came to a spring, and looking into its clear bright water he saw he was shaped like a donkey. This upset him so much that he set off into the world, taking only one faithful companion with him. They wandered hither and thither: finally they reached a kingdom ruled by an old king who had only one daughter, but she was of great beauty. 'We'll stay here,' said the donkey. So he knocked at the gate and called out: 'A guest has come; open up and let him in.' But when they didn't open the gate he sat down, took his lute and played enchanting music on it with his two forefeet. At this the gatekeeper opened his eyes very wide, and ran to the king and said: 'There's a young donkey sitting outside the gate, playing the lute like a past master.' 'Well, bring the musician in to see me,' said the king. But when the minstrel donkey trotted in, they all burst out laughing at him. They were going to put him downstairs to eat with the servants, but this angered him and he said: 'I'm no ordinary ass from any old stable, I'm of noble birth.' So they said: 'If that's so, then you can sit among the soldiers.' 'No,' he said, 'I want to sit beside the king.' The king laughed and said good-humouredly: 'Very well, it shall be as you wish, my young donkey; come and sit beside me.' Then he asked: 'My good young ass, how do you like my daughter?' The donkey turned his head and looked at her, then nodded and said: 'Very well indeed, she is more beautiful than any girl I have seen.' 'Well, then you shall sit next to her,' said the king. 'That suits me,' said the donkey, and he sat by her side and ate and drank and showed very good clean table-manners. When the noble little beast had spent some time at the king's court, he thought: 'What's the use, I must just go home again. And he hung his head sadly, went to the king and asked to take his leave. But the king had become fond of him and said: 'My dear donkey, what's the matter? You look as sour as a jar of vinegar. Stay with me and I'll give you whatever you want. Do you want gold?' 'No,' said the donkey and shook his head. 'Do you want jewellery and precious things?' 'No.' 'Do you want half of my kingdom?' 'Oh no.' Then the king said: 'If only I knew what

would content you! Would you like to marry my beautiful daughter?' 'Oh yes,' said the donkey, 'that indeed I would like.' And suddenly he was merry and in good spirits, for this was exactly what he had been longing for. So a great wedding feast was held. That evening, when the bride and bridegroom were in their bedchamber, the king wanted to find out whether the donkey would behave in a gentle and well-bred manner and he ordered a servant to hide in the room. So when they had both entered the bridegroom bolted the door, looked about him and, thinking that they were all by themselves, suddenly cast off his donkey skin, and there he stood in the form of a handsome young prince. 'Now you see who I am,' he said to his bride, 'and as you see, I was not unworthy of you.' Then she was glad and kissed him and loved him with all her heart. But when morning came he jumped out of bed, put on his animal skin again, and no one would ever have guessed what its real wearer looked like. And presently along came the old king. 'My word, the donkey's up and about-already!' he exclaimed, and said to his daughter: 'I suppose you're very sad not to have married a proper man?' 'Oh no, father dear, I love him as if he were the handsomest of men, and I want to live with him all my life.' The king was astonished, but the servant who had hidden in the bedroom came and told him everything. The king said: 'That can't possibly be true.' 'Then keep watch tomorrow night yourself, sir, you will see it with your own eyes. And, my lord, let me tell you something: take away his skin and throw it into the fire, and then I think he will have to show himself in his true shape.' 'Your advice is good,' said the king. And that night, when they were asleep, he crept into the room, went over to the bed, and there in the moonlight lay a fine young man, with the cast-off skin on the floor beside him. So he took it away and had a blazing fire lit and the skin thrown into it, and stayed there himself until it was completely burnt to ashes. But he wanted to see what the young man would do now that he had lost his skin, so he stayed awake for the rest of the night and listened at the door. At daybreak, when the young man had slept his fill, he got up and was going to put on his donkey skin, but it was nowhere to be found. At this he took fright and said in great sorrow and alarm: 'Now I must make good my escape.' But when he opened the door the king was standing there and said to him: 'My son, what are you thinking of, where are you off to in such a hurry? Stay here! You are such a fine-looking man that I won't let you leave me again. I'll give you half my kingdom now, and after my death you'll get the whole of it.' 'Then I wish,' said the young prince, 'that all may end as well as it has begun; I will stay with you, sir.' So the old man gave him half the kingdom and when he died a year later the prince got the rest, and another one in addition after the death of his own father; and so he lived happy and glorious.