

Donkey Skin – Robert Samber Version

Once upon a time there was a King, so great, so beloved by his people, and so respected by all his neighbours and allies that one might almost say he was the happiest monarch alive. His good fortune was made even greater by the choice he had made for wife of a Princess as beautiful as she was virtuous, with whom he lived in perfect happiness. Now, of this chaste marriage was born a daughter endowed with so many gifts that they had no regret because other children were not given to them.

Magnificence, good taste, and abundance reigned in the palace; there were wise and clever ministers, virtuous and devoted courtiers, faithful and diligent servants. The spacious stables were filled with the most beautiful horses in the world, and coverts of rich caparison; but what most astonished strangers who came to admire them was to see, in the finest stall, a master donkey, with great long ears.

Now, it was not for a whim but for a good reason that the King had given this donkey a particular and distinguished place. The special qualities of this rare animal deserved the distinction, since nature had made it in so extraordinary a way that its litter, instead of being like that of other donkeys, was covered every morning with an abundance of beautiful golden crowns, and golden louis of every kind, which were collected daily.

Since the vicissitudes of life wait on Kings as much as on their subjects, and good is always mingled with ill, it so befell that the Queen was suddenly attacked by a fatal illness, and, in spite of science, and the skill of the doctors, no remedy

could be found. There was great mourning throughout the land. The King who, notwithstanding the famous proverb, that marriage is the tomb of love, was deeply attached to his wife, was distressed beyond measure and made fervent vows to all the temples in his kingdom, and offered to give his life for that of his beloved consort; but he invoked the gods and the Fairies in vain. The Queen, feeling her last hour approach, said to her husband, who was dissolved in tears: "It is well that I should speak to you of a certain matter before I die: if, perchance, you should desire to marry again...." At these words the King broke into piteous cries, took his wife's hands in his own, and assured her that it was useless to speak to him of a second marriage.

"No, my dear spouse," he said at last, "speak to me rather of how I may follow you."

"The State," continued the Queen with a finality which but increased the laments of the King, "the State demands successors, and since I have only given you a daughter, it will urge you to beget sons who resemble you; but I ask you earnestly not to give way to the persuasions of your people until you have found a Princess more beautiful and more perfectly fashioned than I. I beg you to swear this to me, and then I shall die content."

Perchance, the Queen, who did not lack self-esteem, exacted this oath firmly believing that there was not her equal in the world, and so felt assured that the King would never marry again. Be this as it may, at length she died, and never did husband make so much lamentation; the King wept and sobbed day and night, and the punctilious fulfilment of the rites of widower-hood, even the smallest,

was his sole occupation.

But even great griefs do not last for ever. After a time the magnates of the State assembled and came to the King, urging him to take another wife. At first this request seemed hard to him and made him shed fresh tears. He pleaded the vows he had made to the Queen, and defied his counsellors to find a Princess more beautiful and better fashioned than was she, thinking this to be impossible. But the Council treated the promise as a trifle, and said that it mattered little about beauty if the Queen were but virtuous and fruitful. For the State needed Princes for its peace and prosperity, and though, in truth, the Princess, his daughter, had all the qualities requisite for making a great Queen, yet of necessity she must choose an alien for her husband, and then the stranger would take her away with him. If, on the other hand, he remained in her country and shared the throne with her, their children would not be considered to be of pure native stock, and so, there being no Prince of his name, neighbouring peoples would stir up wars, and the kingdom would be ruined.

The King, impressed by these considerations, promised that he would think over the matter. And so search was made among all the marriageable Princesses for one that would suit him. Every day charming portraits were brought him, but none gave promise of the beauty of his late Queen; instead of coming to a decision he brooded over his sorrow until in the end his reason left him. In his delusions he imagined himself once more a young man; he thought the Princess his daughter, in her youth and beauty, was his Queen as he had known her in the days of their courtship, and living thus in

the past he urged the unhappy girl to speedily become his bride.

The young Princess, who was virtuous and chaste, threw herself at the feet of the King her father and conjured him, with all the eloquence she could command, not to constrain her to consent to his unnatural desire.

The King, in his madness, could not understand the reason of her desperate reluctance, and asked an old Druid-priest to set the conscience of the Princess at rest. Now this Druid, less religious than ambitious, sacrificed the cause of innocence and virtue to the favour of so great a monarch, and instead of trying to restore the King to his right mind, he encouraged him in his delusion.

The young Princess, beside herself with misery, at last bethought her of the Lilac-fairy, her godmother; determined to consult her, she set out that same night in a pretty little carriage drawn by a great sheep who knew all the roads. When she arrived the Fairy, who loved the Princess, told her that she knew all she had come to say, but that she need have no fear, for nothing would harm her if only she faithfully fulfilled the Fairy's injunctions. "For, my dear child," she said to her, "it would be a great sin to submit to your father's wishes, but you can avoid the necessity without displeasing him. Tell him that to satisfy a whim you have, he must give you a dress the colour of the weather. Never, in spite of all his love and his power will he be able to give you that."

The Princess thanked her godmother from her heart, and the next morning spoke to the King as the Fairy had counselled her, and protested that no one would win her hand unless he gave her a dress the colour of the weather.

The King, overjoyed and hopeful, called together the most skilful workmen, and demanded this robe of them; otherwise they should be hanged. But he was saved from resorting to this extreme measure, since, on the second day, they brought the much desired robe. The heavens are not a more beautiful blue, when they are girdled with clouds of gold, than was that lovely dress when it was unfolded. The Princess was very sad because of it, and did not know what to do.

Once more she went to her Fairy-godmother who, astonished that her plan had been foiled, now told her to ask for another gown the colour of the moon.

The King again sought out the most clever workmen and expressly commanded them to make a dress the colour of the moon; and woe betide them if between the giving of the order and the bringing of the dress more than twenty-four hours should elapse.

The Princess, though pleased with the dress when it was delivered, gave way to distress when she was with her women and her nurse. The Lilac-fairy, who knew all, hastened to comfort her and said: "Either I am greatly deceived or it is certain that if you ask for a dress the colour of the sun we shall at last baffle the King your father, for it would never be possible to make such a gown; in any case we should gain time."

So the Princess asked for yet another gown as the Fairy bade her. The infatuated King could refuse his daughter nothing, and he gave without regret all the diamonds and rubies in his crown to aid this superb work; nothing was to be spared that could make the dress as beautiful as the sun.

And, indeed, when the dress appeared, all those who unfolded it were obliged to close their eyes, so much were they dazzled. And, truth to tell, green spectacles and smoked glasses date from that time.

What was the Princess to do? Never had so beautiful and so artistic a robe been seen. She was dumb-founded, and pretending that its brilliance had hurt her eyes she retired to her chamber, where she found the Fairy awaiting her.

On seeing the dress like the sun, the Lilac-fairy became red with rage. "Oh! this time, my child," she said to the Princess, "we will put the King to terrible proof. In spite of his madness I think he will be a little astonished by the request that I counsel you to make of him; it is that he should give you the skin of that ass he loves so dearly, and which supplies him so profusely with the means of paying all his expenses. Go, and do not fail to tell him that you want this skin." The Princess, overjoyed at finding yet another avenue of escape; for she thought that her father could never bring himself to sacrifice the ass, went to find him, and unfolded to him her latest desire.

Although the King was astonished by this whim, he did not hesitate to satisfy it; the poor ass was sacrificed and the skin brought, with due ceremony, to the Princess, who, seeing no other way of avoiding her ill-fortune, was desperate.

At that moment her godmother arrived. "What are you doing, my child?" she asked, seeing the Princess tearing her hair, her beautiful cheeks stained with tears. "This is the most happy moment of your life. Wrap yourself in this skin, leave the palace, and walk so long as you can find ground to

carry you: when one sacrifices everything to virtue the gods know how to mete out reward. Go, and I will take care that your possessions follow you; in whatever place you rest, your chest with your clothes and your jewels will follow your steps, and here is my wand which I will give you: tap the ground with it when you have need of the chest, and it will appear before your eyes: but haste to set forth, and do not delay." The Princess embraced her godmother many times, and begged her not to forsake her. Then after she had smeared herself with soot from the chimney, she wrapped herself up in that ugly skin and went out from the magnificent palace without being recognised by a single person.

The absence of the Princess caused a great commotion. The King, who had caused a sumptuous banquet to be prepared, was inconsolable. He sent out more than a hundred gendarmes, and more than a thousand musketeers in quest of her; but the Lilac-fairy made her invisible to the cleverest seekers, and thus she escaped their vigilance.

Meanwhile the Princess walked far, far and even farther away; after a time she sought for a resting place, but although out of charity people gave her food, she was so dishevelled and dirty that no one wanted to keep her. At length she came to a beautiful town, at the gate of which was a small farm. Now the farmer's wife had need of a wench to wash the dishes and to attend to the geese and the pigs, and seeing so dirty a vagrant offered to engage her. The Princess, who was now much fatigued, accepted joyfully. She was put into a recess in the kitchen where for the first days she was subjected to the coarse jokes of the men-servants, so dirty and unpleasant did the donkey-skin make

her appear. At last they tired of their pleasantries; moreover she was so attentive to her work that the farmer's wife took her under her protection. She minded the sheep, and penned them up when it was necessary, and she took the geese out to feed with such intelligence that it seemed as if she had never done anything else. Everything that her beautiful hands undertook was done well.

One day she was sitting near a clear fountain where she often repaired to bemoan her sad condition, when she thought she would look at herself in the water. The horrible donkey-skin which covered her from head to toe revolted her. Ashamed, she washed her face and her hands, which became whiter than ivory, and once again her lovely complexion took its natural freshness. The joy of finding herself so beautiful filled her with the desire to bathe in the pool, and this she did. But she had to don her unworthy skin again before she returned to the farm.

By good fortune the next day chanced to be a holiday, and so she had leisure to tap for her chest with the fairy's wand, arrange her toilet, powder her beautiful hair and put on the lovely gown which was the colour of the weather; but the room was so small that the train could not be properly spread out. The beautiful Princess looked at herself, and with good reason, admired her appearance so much that she resolved to wear her magnificent dresses in turn on holidays and Sundays for her own amusement, and this she regularly did. She entwined flowers and diamonds in her lovely hair with admirable art, and often she sighed that she had no witness of her beauty save the sheep and geese, who loved her just as much in the horrible donkey-skin after which she

had been named at the farm.

One holiday when Donkey-skin had put on her sun-hued dress, the son of the King to whom the farm belonged alighted there to rest on his return from the hunt. This Prince was young and handsome, beloved of his father and of the Queen his mother, and adored by the people. After he had partaken of the simple collation which was offered him he set out to inspect the farm-yard and all its nooks and corners. In going thus from place to place, he entered a dark alley at the bottom of which was a closed door. Curiosity made him put his eye to the keyhole. Imagine his astonishment at seeing a Princess so beautiful and so richly dressed, and withal of so noble and dignified a mien, that he took her to be a divinity. The impetuosity of his feelings at this moment would have made him force the door, had it not been for the respect with which that charming figure filled him.

It was with difficulty that he withdrew from this gloomy little alley, intent on discovering who the inmate of the tiny room might be. He was told that it was a scullion called Donkey-skin because of the skin which she always wore, and that she was so dirty and unpleasant that no one took any notice of her, or even spoke to her; she had just been taken out of pity to look after the geese.

The Prince, though little satisfied by this information, saw that these dense people knew no more, and that it was useless to question them. So he returned to the palace of the King his father, beyond words in love, having continually before his eyes the beautiful image of the goddess whom he had seen through the keyhole. He was full of regret that he had not knocked at the door, and promised himself that he

would not fail to do so next time. But the fervency of his love caused him such great agitation that the same night he was seized by a terrible fever, and was soon at death's door. The Queen, who had no other child, was in despair because all remedies proved useless. In vain she promised great rewards to the doctors; though they exerted all their skill, nothing would cure the Prince. At last they decided that some great sorrow had caused this terrible fever. They told the Queen, who, full of tenderness for her son, went to him and begged him to tell her his trouble. She declared that even if it was a matter of giving him the crown, his father would yield the throne to him without regret; or if he desired some Princess, even though there should be war with the King her father and their subjects should, with reason, complain, all should be sacrificed to obtain what he wished. She implored him with tears not to die, since their life depended on his. The Queen did not finish this touching discourse without moving the Prince to tears.

"Madam," he said at last, in a very feeble voice, "I am not so base that I desire the crown of my father, rather may Heaven grant him life for many years, and that I may always be the most faithful and the most respectful of his subjects! As to the Princesses that you speak of, I have never yet thought of marriage, and you well know that, subject as I am to your wishes, I shall obey you always, even though it be painful to me."

"Ah! my son," replied the Queen, "we will spare nothing to save your life. But, my dear child, save mine and that of the King your father by telling me what you desire, and be assured that you shall have it."

"Well, Madam," he said, "since you would have me tell you my thought, I obey you. It would indeed be a sin to place in danger two lives so dear to me. Know, my mother, that I wish Donkey-skin to make me a cake, and to have it brought to me when it is ready."

The Queen, astonished at this strange name, asked who Donkey-skin might be.

"It is, Madam," replied one of her officers who had by chance seen this girl, "It is the most ugly creature imaginable after the wolf, a slut who lodges at your farm, and minds your geese."

"It matters not," said the Queen; "my son, on his way home from the chase, has perchance eaten of her cakes; it is a whim such as those who are sick do sometimes have. In a word, I wish that Donkey-skin, since Donkey-skin it is, make him presently a cake."

A messenger ran to the farm and told Donkey-skin that she was to make a cake for the Prince as well as she possibly could. Now, some believe that Donkey-skin had been aware of the Prince in her heart at the moment when he had put his eye to the keyhole; and then, looking from her little window, she had seen him, so young, so handsome, and so shapely, that the remembrance of him had remained, and that often the thought of him had cost her some sighs. Be that as it may, Donkey-skin, either having seen him, or having heard him spoken of with praise, was overjoyed to think that she might become known to him. She shut herself in her little room, threw off the ugly skin, bathed her face and hands, arranged her hair, put on a beautiful corsage of bright silver, and an equally beautiful petticoat, and then set herself

to make the much desired cake. She took the finest flour, and newest eggs and freshest butter, and while she was working them, whether by design or no, a ring which she had on her finger fell into the cake and was mixed in it. When the cooking was done she muffled herself in her horrible skin and gave the cake to the messenger, asking him for news of the Prince; but the man would not deign to reply, and without a word ran quickly back to the palace.

The Prince took the cake greedily from the man's hands, and ate it with such voracity that the doctors who were present did not fail to say that this haste was not a good sign. Indeed, the Prince came near to being choked by the ring, which he nearly swallowed, in one of the pieces of cake. But he drew it cleverly from his mouth, and his desire for the cake was forgotten as he examined the fine emerald set in a gold keeper-ring, a ring so small that he knew it could only be worn on the prettiest little finger in the world.

He kissed the ring a thousand times, put it under his pillow, and drew it out every moment that he thought himself unobserved. The torment that he gave himself, planning how he might see her to whom the ring belonged, not daring to believe that if he asked for Donkey-skin she would be allowed to come, and not daring to speak of what he had seen through the keyhole for fear that he would be laughed at for a dreamer, brought back the fever with great violence. The doctors, not knowing what more to do, declared to the Queen that the Prince's malady was love, whereupon the Queen and the disconsolate King ran to their son.

"My son, my dear son," cried the affected monarch, "tell us the name of her whom you desire: we swear that we will

give her to you. Even though she were the vilest of slaves."

The Queen embracing him, agreed with all that the King had said, and the Prince, moved by their tears and caresses, said to them: "My father and my mother, I in no way desire to make a marriage which is displeasing to you." And drawing the emerald from under his pillow he added: "To prove the truth of this, I desire to marry her to whom this ring belongs. It is not likely that she who owns so pretty a ring is a rustic or a peasant."

The King and the Queen took the ring, examined it with great curiosity, and agreed with the Prince that it could only belong to the daughter of a good house. Then the King, having embraced his son, and entreated him to get well, went out. He ordered the drums and fifes and trumpets to be sounded throughout the town, and the heralds to cry that she whose finger a certain ring would fit should marry the heir to the throne.

First the Princesses arrived, then the duchesses, and the marquises, and the baronesses; but though they did all they could to make their fingers small, none could put on the ring. So the country girls had to be tried, but pretty though they all were, they all had fingers that were too fat. The Prince, who was feeling better, made the trial himself. At last it was the turn of the chamber-maids; but they succeeded no better. Then, when everyone else had tried, the Prince asked for the kitchen-maids, the scullions, and the sheep-girls. They were all brought to the palace, but their coarse red, short, fingers would hardly go through the golden hoop as far as the nail.

"You have not brought that Donkey-skin, who made me the cake," said the Prince.

Everyone laughed and said, "No," so dirty and unpleasant was she.

"Let someone fetch her at once," said the King; "it shall not be said that I left out the lowliest." And the servants ran laughing and mocking to find the goose-girl.

The Princess, who had heard the drums and the cries of the heralds, had no doubt that the ring was the cause of this uproar. Now, she loved the Prince, and, as true love is timorous and has no vanity, she was in perpetual fear that some other lady would be found to have a finger as small as hers. Great, then, was her joy when the messengers came and knocked at her door. Since she knew that they were seeking the owner of the right finger on which to set her ring, some impulse had moved her to arrange her hair with great care, and to put on her beautiful silver corsage, and the petticoat full of furbelows and silver lace studded with emeralds. At the first knock she quickly covered her finery with the donkey-skin and opened the door. The visitors, in derision, told her that the King had sent for her in order to marry her to his son. Then with loud peals of laughter they led her to the Prince, who was astonished at the garb of this girl, and dared not believe that it was she whom he had seen so majestic and so beautiful. Sad and confounded, he said, "Is it you who lodge at the bottom of that dark alley in the third yard of the farm?"

"Yes, your Highness," she replied.

"Show me your hand," said the Prince trembling, and heaving a deep sigh.

Imagine how astonished everyone was! The King and the

Queen, the chamberlains and all the courtiers were dumb-founded, when from beneath that black and dirty skin came a delicate little white and rose-pink hand, and the ring slipped without difficulty on to the prettiest little finger in the world. Then, by a little movement which the Princess made, the skin fell from her shoulders and so enchanting was her guise, that the Prince, weak though he was, fell on his knees and held her so closely that she blushed. But that was scarcely noticed, for the King and Queen came to embrace her heartily, and to ask her if she would marry their son. The Princess, confused by all these caresses and by the love of the handsome young Prince, was about to thank them when suddenly the ceiling opened, and the Lilac-fairy descended in a chariot made of the branches and flowers from which she took her name, and, with great charm, told the Princess's story. The King and Queen, overjoyed to know that Donkey-skin was a great Princess redoubled their caresses, but the Prince was even more sensible of her virtue, and his love increased as the Fairy unfolded her tale. His impatience to marry her, indeed, was so great that he could scarcely allow time for the necessary preparations for the grand wedding which was their due. The King and Queen, now entirely devoted to their daughter-in-law, overwhelmed her with affection. She had declared that she could not marry the Prince without the consent of the King her father, so, he was the first to whom an invitation to the wedding was sent; he was not, however, told the name of the bride. The Lilac-fairy, who, as was right, presided over all, had recommended this course to prevent trouble. Kings came from all the countries round, some in sedan-chairs, others in beautiful carriages; those who came from the most

distant countries rode on elephants and tigers and eagles. But the most magnificent and most glorious of all was the father of the Princess. He had happily recovered his reason, and had married a Queen who was a widow and very beautiful, but by whom he had no child. The Princess ran to him, and he recognised her at once and embraced her with great tenderness before she had time to throw herself on her knees. The King and Queen presented their son to him, and the happiness of all was complete. The nuptials were celebrated with all imaginable pomp, but the young couple were hardly aware of the ceremony, so wrapped up were they in one another.

In spite of the protests of the noble-hearted young man, the Prince's father caused his son to be crowned the same day, and kissing his hand, placed him on the throne.

The celebrations of this illustrious marriage lasted nearly three months, but the love of the two young people would have endured for more than a hundred years, had they out-lived that age, so great was their affection for one another.

The Moral

It scarce may be believed,
This tale of Donkey-skin;
But laughing children in the home;
Yea, mothers, and grandmothers too,
Are little moved by facts!
By them 'twill be received.