Donkey-Skin

TO THE MARQUISE DE LAMBERT*

Some lofty persons seldom smile,
And cannot bear to give their time,
Regarding literary style,
To anything that’s not sublime.
With views like theirs I can’t agree.
The highest minds, it seems to me,
May sometimes condescend to go
To watch, let’s say, a puppet-show,
Without incurring loss of face.
Given the proper time and place,
Sublimity may suit less well
Than some diverting bagatelle.
Nor should it cause us much surprise
That men of sense, at times oppressed
By hours of work, should think it wise
To free themselves from reason’s bonds,
And pleasantly be lulled to rest
By some old tale of maids distressed,
Of ogres,* spells, and magic wands.
Ignoring, then, the blame I may incur
For wasting time, I’ll do as you prefer,
Madame; so let me now begin
The tale, in full, of Donkey-Skin.

There ruled a mighty king in days of yore,
Greater than any who had ruled before;
Well-loved in peace, in war arousing fear,
No other king could claim to be his peer.
With enemies subdued, his triumphs made
A shield for peaceful virtues, arts, and trade,
And brought prosperity in place of strife.
The charm and beauty of his faithful wife,
As gentle and as kind as she was fair,
Entranced him still: at home he had the air
Less of a king with consort at his side,
And more the bridegroom with his radiant bride.
The union of this loving pair
Produced no other child but one,
And that a daughter, not a son;
In virtue, though, beyond compare:
And so her parents did not much repine
That she alone would carry on their line.

Throughout the palace of this king
Magnificence was everything.
Footmen and courtiers by the score
Were swarming in each corridor;
Great stables had been built to hold
Each and every breed of horse,
In many sizes, all, of course,
Caparisoned in cloth of gold.
A truly striking sight was there:
The place of honour was reserved
For Donkey Ned with wagging ear.
You think this honour undeserved?
Then hear how justified it is
By Ned’s amazing qualities.
Nature had made the beast so pure
That what he dropped was not manure,
But sovereigns and gold crowns instead
(Imprinted with the royal head)
Which every morning Master Ned
Left for collection on his bed.
But Heaven grows tired, now and then,
Of granting happiness to men,
And puts some sorrows in our way
Like rainstorms on a sunny day.
A sickness struck the King’s beloved wife,
Grew worse and worse: it soon attacked her life.
Help was sought throughout the land,
Doctors arrived on every hand.
The Faculty of Medicine was consulted:
They looked in books by ancient Greeks,
While fashionable alternative techniques
Were counselled by the quacks: no cure resulted.
The patient worsened. Nothing could arrest
The malady which daily still progressed.

The Queen, then, feeling close to death,
Addressed, in solemn words, the King:
‘Permit me with my dying breath
To ask of you, my dear, one thing:
That if you should desire to wed
When I am gone . . .’ ‘Alas!’ her husband said,
‘Have no anxieties of such a kind;
For never will I take another bride;
So please dismiss these worries from your mind.’
‘That’s what I thought you’d say, my dear,’ replied
The Queen; ‘of that your passion makes me sure;
But yet I’d like to feel still more secure:
I’d like to hear you swear an oath
(On which I know I can rely)
That only if you find a woman both
More lovely and more virtuous than I,
You may, upon this one condition,
Marry her with my permission.’
She thought, so certain of her charms was she,
That such an oath would be a guarantee
(Though got by cunning) that he would refrain
From ever marrying again.
The King burst into tears and vowed
To do whatever she desired.

She in his arms forthwith expired,
And never did a husband weep so loud.
By night and day his sobs came thick and fast.
The courtiers judged his sorrow could not last;
He wept, they said, as if he wished to see
The mourning done as promptly as might be.
The court proved right. Some months went past,
And then the King announced he thought it good
To choose another consort if he could.

He had a tricky problem now
Because he had to keep his vow;
And therefore any wife he found
Must be at least as fair of face,
As well endowed with wit and grace,
As was the first, now underground.

But not at court, though beauties there abound,
Nor in the towns or countryside,
Nor in neighbouring lands beside,
Was any other woman seen
As lovely as the former queen,
Except her daughter; she alone
With young and tender beauties of her own,
Possessed attractions that the Queen had lacked.
The King, now mad with love, observed the fact,
And got the crazy notion in his head
That he and the Princess should therefore wed.
An expert casuist\(^*\) he found contended
That such a match, perhaps, could be defended.
But she was much disturbed, and had no rest
On hearing sentiments like these expressed;
She sobbed and wept by day and night.
She went, with sad and weary heart,
To tell her godmother about her plight.
This fairy’s dwelling, set apart,
Was in a distant grotto, filled
With coral, pearls, and shells; in magic art
Her godmother was very skilled.

(What fairies were in olden times
You will not need to learn from me;
Your Grandma told you on her knee,
Along with tales and nursery rhymes.)

She said, on seeing her: ‘My dear,
I know why you’re so sad, and why you’re here,
But now you’re with me, have no fear.
Nothing will do you harm, provided
That you will let yourself be guided
By my advice. Your father, it is true,
Has said he wants to marry you.
To ask for such a thing is mad;
If you agree, that’s just as bad.
To thwart him, while not seeming to refuse,
We’ll circumvent his folly with a ruse.
You need to say you won’t consent
To marry till you’re quite content
With what you ask him now to give: a dress
The colour of the heavens*—something which,
However great he is, however rich,
Though Heaven has always given him success,
Will prove beyond his powers to do.’

*An expert casuist defends the match
The Princess, trembling through and through,
To give this message went her way.
The King, without the least delay,
Called dressmakers across the land,
And made them clearly understand
That what he wanted was a dress,
Sky-coloured, for the young Princess;
And further that they’d best not make him wait
More than a day before the job was done,
For if they did, as sure as fate,
He’d send them to the gallows, every one.
Before the sun rose on the second morn
The precious dress was ready to be worn:
Its sheer and splendid azure hue
Outshone the sky’s most glorious blue
When clouds are strewn across it golden bright.

The Princess, with more sorrow than delight,
Is lost for words; she’s very much afraid
She’ll have to keep the bargain that she’s made.
‘You’ve got to ask him for another boon,’
She hears her fairy godmother declare:
‘No common gift this time, but rare:
A dress the colour of the moon;
He cannot give it.’ But her new demand
At once becomes the monarch’s next command.
He calls embroiderers: ‘Diana’s globe
Will shine at night more dimly than this robe;
Within four days, the work must be complete,’
He says; and in four days, it’s at his feet,
And just as beautiful as he’d required.
The moon when skies are clear, attired
In silver for her evening parade,
So bright she makes the stars and planets fade,
Is less superb and radiant than the dress.
Astonished and admiring, the Princess
Was almost ready to give in; but then,
Encouraged by her godmother again,
She asked another gift—a better one;
‘My lord,’ she said, ‘with this I’ll be content:
I want a dress the colour of the sun.’
In his excess of love, her father sent
To fetch the finest jeweller that there was.
‘Make me this gleaming dress,’ the man was told,
‘In cloth all sewn with diamonds and gold;
And do it well,’ the King went on, ‘because,
If not, you’ll die of torture, have no doubt.’
The threat was never carried out:
The man was disinclined to shirk.
He sent the precious piece of work
Within a week. So splendid was this dress
That bright-haired Phoebus, when across the skies
He drives his chariot of gold, is less
Ablaze with light, and dazzles less our eyes.

Dumbfounded by these gifts, the poor Princess
Finds no reply to thwart her king and lord.
Her godmother is close at hand: ‘My dear,
You can’t stop now,’ she whispers in her ear;
‘There’s nothing that your father can’t afford;
You know he has the donkey still,
Which while it’s there will always fill
His treasury with crowns of gold.
Just ask him for the creature’s skin.
Since that is what his wealth is in,
This gift, I’m sure, is one that he’ll withhold.’

The fairy was extremely wise,
No doubt, but failed to realize
That lovers never count the cost
Of all the gold and silver lost
If once their passion gains its prize.
The monarch, therefore, gallantly complied
And met his daughter’s wish; the donkey died.

They bring the skin to her: she’s filled with dread,
And bitterly bewails the fate that lies ahead;
But then her godmother appears:
‘Those who do good,’ she says, ‘need have no fears.
First you must lead your father to believe
That you will share with him the married state;
But on the wedding day, alone, you’ll leave:
You must not risk so horrible a fate;
Go in disguise to some far distant place.
Here now,’ she added, ‘is your travelling case.
It’s large enough to hold your dressing things,
Your brushes, mirror, rubies, diamond rings,
And all your clothes; moreover here’s my wand
For you to use. The casket will respond
By following wherever you may go,
But secretly, deep in the ground below.
Then should you want to see the chest,
Just take the wand and keep it pressed
Against the earth, and then and there
The chest will magically appear.
To guard yourself from prying eyes,
The donkey-skin’s a fine disguise,
For nobody could ever guess,
Seeing you in so foul a dress,
That such a filthy thing could hide
Someone so beautiful inside.’
Thus camouflaged, the Princess went away,
Bidding the fairy many fond farewells,
In the cool air of morning. On that day
The King had hoped to hear the wedding bells
Ring out in joy; but he’s bereft;
They tell him that his bride has left.

Each house, each street, each avenue
Was rigorously searched, and searched again;
But all the agitation was in vain,
For how or where she’d vanished, no one knew.
A sad, despondent mood spread all about:
No wedding meant no cakes, no sweets, no feast;
The ladies of the court were much put out,
And hardly ate a thing; as for the priest,
His meal was late and meagre; what was worse,
No church collection helped to fill his purse.

Journeying onwards all this time
Her face besmeared with dirt and grime,
The Princess begged from passers-by.
On coming to a house, she’d try
To get herself a servant’s place,
But when they saw her grubby face,
Together with the skin she wore,
The wives she asked, however poor,
However coarse, would shut the door.
So on she trudged, and on and on, until
She reached a farmhouse where the wife required
A serving-girl with just sufficient skill
To do the lowest chores; and she was hired,
To wash the rags and keep the pig-trough clean.
A corner of the kitchen, dark and mean,
Became her home, and here she had to mix
With farmhands, oafs, and louts, who played her tricks
At every turn; they harassed her,
Tormented her, embarrassed her;
She was the butt of all their rustic fun,
Of every joke and every stupid pun.
She had on Sundays some few hours of rest.
She had a little work to do, no more;
Returning to her room, she barred the door.
She’d wash away the grime, and from the chest
Would take her toilet-cloth, and lots
Of creams and lotions neatly stored in pots.
The looking-glass she’d carefully arrange,
Then stood before it, happy, full of pride,
Wearing each dress in turn. The first she tried
Was like the moon, all silver. Then she’d change,
And wear the dress that brilliantly outshone
The sun itself; then finally put on
The azure dress whose gorgeous hue
Surpassed the heavens’ purest blue.
The trouble was, the room could not contain
Each dress’s generously flowing train.
It was a joy to gaze at her reflection
And see herself so beautifully dressed:
She thought that with her pure complexion
She must look finer than the rest,
Which kept her spirits up till next weekend.

Something I may have failed to mention
Is that the farmyard had a large extension
In which innumerable birds were penned:
An aviary; the King, who liked display,
Showed off his riches in this way,
With musk-fed geese* and cormorants and quails,
And little bustards, bantam hens, and rails,
Birds of a thousand kinds or more,
Each stranger than the one before,
Filling a dozen courtyards in their cages.
The monarch’s son would come with friends and pages
To rest awhile in this delightful place
And take cool drinks, when thirsty from the chase.
This Prince’s martial looks did not resemble
Those of the fair Adonis: regal his mien,
And fierce his glance; the bravest foes would tremble
Before him in the field. Thus was he seen
By Donkey-Skin, with tender admiration;
Watching afar, she knew that for her part,
Despite the dirt and squalor of her station,
Her feelings proved she had a royal heart.
‘He truly has a prince’s air,’
She thought, ‘while seeming not to care
About his greatness. And how much
He merits love! Oh happy she
Whose beauty and whose love might touch
His heart and keep it hers! And as for me,
I’d sooner wear the meanest, poorest dress
That he might give, than any I possess.’

This Prince, when walking, came one day,
Among the courtyards where the birds were kept,
Upon a door along a passageway,
And this was where the Princess slept.
The keyhole as it chanced was at a height
Just right to look through. As it chanced,
The day was Sunday too; so when he glanced
Into her room, he saw a wondrous sight:
The diamonds lay round her neck; and spun
From gold, her dress was dazzling like the sun.
The Prince stood there transfixed in contemplation;
Scarce could he breathe, so great his admiration.
And yet, despite the gorgeous clothes she wore,
Her countenance attracted him much more:
Its perfect outline, full of grace,
Her young complexion, fresh and clear,
Gave sweet expression to her face;
Besides, so virtuous did she appear,
With dignity and modesty combined,
The outward signs of beauty in the mind,
That her demeanour played the greatest part
In making her the mistress of his heart.

Three times from sudden love he raised his fist
Against the door, but only to desist:
Three times respect made him withdraw;
It seemed a goddess that he saw.
Back to the palace he made his pensive way,
To sigh and languish there by night and day.
The Carnival has started: he rejects
All invitations to the dance; objects
To theatre; hunting he abominates;
The most alluring food he hates.
And as he mournfully repines,
He’s lost in apathy, his health declines.
One day he asked the unknown beauty’s name.
‘Who can she be, this lovely nymph, whose room
Is in that nasty alley deep in gloom
Beyond the poultry-yard?’ The answer came:
‘It must be Donkey-Skin you mean,’
They said; ‘but she’s no nymph; and “Donkey-Skin”
She’s called because it’s what she dresses in.
An uglier brute you’ve never seen.
A she-wolf’s prettier than her, for sure;
If love’s an illness, she’s the perfect cure.’
Much else they say, but all in vain.
Her image now is deeply traced
Inside his mind, and cannot be effaced:
He’s caught by love; he’ll not be free again.

Meanwhile the Queen his mother cannot rest,
Seeing her son so gloomy and depressed.
The Prince, though plunged in grief, will not disclose
The reason for these most distressing woes,
And when she tenderly enquires
Says only this: what he desires
Is just that Donkey-Skin should bake,
For him and him alone, a cake.
His mother cannot take it in,
And asks: ‘Who is this Donkey-Skin?’
‘Oh Heavens!—her?’ they said, ‘oh dear!
Dear Madam, she’s a miserable slut!
A dirtier beast you’ll not find anywhere:
A proper slattern!’—‘That’s as may be; but,’
The Queen said, ‘if my son desires a dish
Prepared by her, I’ll see he gets his wish.’
(If he had asked, she loved him so, you see,
He would have had gold coins for tea.)

So Donkey-Skin became a cook.
Butter and salt and eggs she took,
Inside the hovel where she lived,
With flour most scrupulously sieved
(She knew that when it’s sifted fine
The mixture’s easy to combine),
And having washed herself she shed
From off her shoulders, arms, and head
Her dirty, shaggy camouflage,
And took instead a fine corsage
Of silver which she neatly laced
To wear around her slender waist,
And thus attired, began to cook.
By chance—some say she didn’t look—
A ring she had of flawless gold,
And happened to be wearing, fell
Into the cake; though I’ve been told,
By those who know the story well,
That Donkey-Skin intended it to fall.
To me that’s not impossible at all,
For speaking honestly I’m sure
That when the Prince, outside her door,
Had stood that time while peeping through,
She knew it; women always do.
A woman’s senses are so keen,
She’s so alert, that if your eye should chance
To rest on her a moment, then your glance
Will be observed; she’ll sense that she’s been seen.
And then there is another thing:
The Princess, when she dropped her ring—
Unless I’m very much deceived;
In fact I’d swear to it—believed
That what she’d hidden for her lover
He’d be most happy to discover.

And never did a woman make
A softer, more enticing cake.
He tasted it with much delight,
Then gobbled it; and truth to tell,
He nearly ate the ring as well,
So wolfish was his appetite.
But when he found it and beheld
Its gorgeous emerald stone, his bosom swelled
With greater joy: the little golden band
Seemed still to hold the beauty of her hand.
He put it by his pillow where he slept,
In order that his secret should be kept.
Yet visibly meanwhile his health declined,
And doctors of experience and skill,
As he grew thinner, with one voice opined
That it was love that made the Prince so ill.

Now touching marriage, hostile things are said;
But nonetheless, for maladies like this
The recommended cure is married bliss;
It was resolved, therefore, that he should wed.
He seemed a while reluctant, then replied:
‘Upon this one condition, I’ll agree:
That she whose finger fits this ring must be
The woman that you give me for my bride.’
The King’s and Queen’s surprise was very great,
But seeing that the Prince’s state
Was sad indeed, they judged it best
Not to refuse his strange request.
At once a search is ordered by the King
To find the finger that will fit the ring,
And much improve its owner’s situation,
However low or high her social station.

Each maiden’s purpose now becomes the same;
All have to bring their fingers to be tried;
None thinks another has a better claim.
In order, though (so rumour says), to win
The Prince’s heart and be his bride,
The finger needs to be extremely thin,
And charlatans sell recipes to render
The fingers of the buyers very slender.
One lady, by a monstrous whim,
Decides to make her fingers slim
By scraping them, as she might trim
Some carrots; while another snips
Small pieces from her finger-tips.
Then with a press another tries
By squeezing to reduce their size.
Another yet, to make them thin,
Obtains some acid, dips them in,
And lets it burn away the skin.
These ladies will try anything
To make a finger fit the ring.

The tests commence: first come the young princesses,
The duchesses, and then the marchionesses.
Fine hands they have, but just a little thick:
Not fine enough, it seems, to do the trick.
Daughters of barons next, of counts and earls,
Of lesser gentry too; to no avail:
Like others higher in the social scale,
Their fingers are too big. Then come the girls
Of lower birth and duller dress,
But not of less attractiveness.
Their fingers, though, at each attempt,
When shape and fit appear, this time, just right,
All fail; the ring appears to show contempt,
And slips or sticks: too loose, or else too tight.
So then they had to let the rest apply:
The servants and the maids, the lesser fry,
Whose hands are red and roughened by the tub,
Who have the clothes to wash, the floors to scrub,
The poultry-yard to clean—in fact the lot.
The prize is just as much for them to win,
They think, as for some miss with smoother skin.
Many a girl with fingers broad and squat
Made her appearance then to try
The prince’s ring, with no more hope
Than if she thought to take a rope
And thread it through a needle’s eye.
It seemed that nothing more could then be done,
For all had tried the ring, except for one:
Still working in the kitchen, quite neglected,
Was Donkey-Skin. ‘And she can’t be expected,’
They said, ‘to wed the Prince and reign
As queen, that’s absolutely plain.’
‘Why not?’ replied the Prince; ‘let her appear.’
Then laughter spread among the crowd,
And everyone exclaimed aloud:
‘What can he mean? Allow her here,
That filthy creature? What a joke!’
But when from underneath the cloak
Of rough and dirty skin she drew
A hand like ivory, shot through
With just a touch of rosy pink,
Then nobody knew what to think;
And next, before their unbelieving eyes,
Her finger slid into the fateful ring,
And fitted it; which caused no small surprise.
They thought they’d better take her to the King,
But first, she said, in order to appear
Before her royal master and her lord,
There was a single favour she implored:
To find herself some other clothes to wear.
And now the courtiers thought to mock,
And laugh their fill at Donkey-Skin’s new frock;
But when, once in the palace, she proceeded
From room to room, and wore a splendid gown,
Superbly beautiful, which far exceeded
All dresses ever known in court or town,
With on her head the diamonds shining bright
Which made each golden hair a ray of light,
With azure eyes, whose sweet and noble fire,
Bewitching, proud, were certain to inspire
Love with every glance; and when her waist,
So slender that it might have been embraced
Between a man’s two hands: when all, at last,
Was seen divinely fair, she far surpassed
The courtly ladies in their fine array;
Their beauties simply seemed to fade away.

Loudly the crowd rejoiced on every side;
The worthy King could scarce contain his glee
Seeing the beauty of the wife-to-be:
The Queen already doted on the bride.
As for the love-lorn Prince, their son and heir,
The passage in so short a time
From misery to joy sublime
Was almost more than he could bear.

Then all looked forward to the wedding day
And started to prepare without delay;
The kings and queens around had invitations:
Bedecked in ornaments of every kind,
Leaving their native lands behind
They rode to join the celebrations.
From far and wide they came; among them, some
Had journeyed from Aurora’s distant lands*
Mounted on elephants; others had come
Out of Arabia’s desert coasts and sands:
So dark and ugly that they made
The children very much afraid;
And all these guests, their numbers growing,
Soon filled the court to overflowing.
But none, of any prince or potentate,
Arrived in more resplendent state
Than did the father of the bride.
Though once in love, he’d cast aside
The passion burning up his soul like fire;
He’d banished any criminal desire,
And of those hateful wishes, now suppressed,
All that remained served only to inspire
Deeper devotion in his breast.
On seeing her he weeps: ‘Now Heaven be blessed,
My dearest child,’ he cries, ‘that by its grace
We meet again, and that I am allowed
To see you here!’ They joyously embrace:
Their joy is shared by all the crowd.
The groom is just as pleased and proud
That marriage to his love will bring
Alliance with a mighty king.
Just then the fairy godmother arrives,
To tell them all, in full, the story
Of Donkey-Skin, and thus contrives
To cover her with greater glory.

There are some lessons that a child may learn
From listening to this tale: they won’t take long;
And first that sufferings, however stern,
Are preferable by far to doing wrong;
And next, whatever trials life may send
Virtue will always triumph in the end;
Also that love deranged defies all sense:
Against it, reason is a poor defence;
Lovers, extravagant beyond all measure,
Will give away for love their dearest treasure.
Again: young ladies may be fed
On nothing but the coarsest bread
Provided that, besides such fare,
They have some pretty clothes to wear;
And not a woman anywhere
Will not believe that she’s as fair
As all the rest; and in addition
Has never dreamt that when of old
They held that famous competition
To win the apple made of gold,*
If she’d been there, as goddesses paraded,
She surely would have looked as good as they did,
Or better still, and would have been
Paris’s choice as beauty queen.

This tale is hard to credit, to be sure,
But yet, as long as children dwell
Upon this earth, with mums and grans as well,
Its memory will stay secure.