

The Miller, His Son, and the Ass

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Because the arts are plainly birthright matters,
For fables we to ancient Greece are debtors;
But still this field could not be reaped so clean
As not to let us, later comers, glean.
The fiction world has deserts yet to dare,
And, daily, authors make discoveries there.
I had fain repeat one which our man of song,
Old Malherbe, told one day to young Racan.
Of Horace they the rivals and the heirs,
Apollo's pets, my masters, I should say,
Sole by themselves were met, I'm told, one day,
Confiding each to each their thoughts and cares.
Racan begins: Pray end my inward strife,
For well you know, my friend, what's what in life,
Who through its varied course, from stage to stage,
Have stored the full experience of age;
What shall I do? It's time I chose profession.
You know my fortune, birth, and disposition.
Ought I to make the country my resort,
Or seek the army, or to rise at court?
There's nothing but mixes bitterness with charms;
War has its pleasures; hymen, its alarms.
It were nothing hard to take my natural bent,
But I have a world of people to content.
"Content a world!" old Malherbe cries; "who can, sir?
Why, let me tell a story before I answer."
A miller and his son, I have somewhere read,
The first in years, the other but a lad,
A fine, smart boy, however, I should say,
To sell their ass went to a fair one day.
In order there to get the highest price,
They needs must keep their donkey fresh and nice;
So, tying fast his feet, they swung him clear,
And bore him hanging like a chandelier.
Alas! poor, simple-minded country fellows!
The first that sees their load, loud laughing, bellows,
"What farce is this to split good people's sides?
The most an ass is not the one that rides!"
The miller, much enlightened by this talk,
Untied his precious beast, and made him walk.
The ass, who liked the other mode of travel,
Brayed some complaint at trudging on the gravel;
Whereat, not understanding well the beast,
The miller caused his hopeful son to ride,
And walked behind, without a spark of pride.
Three merchants passed, and, mightily displeased,
The eldest of these gentlemen cried out,
"Ho there! dismount, for shame, you lubber lout!
Nor make a foot-boy of your grey-beard sire;

Change places, as the rights of age require."
"To please you, sirs," the miller said, "I ought."
So down the young and up the old man got.
Three girls next passing, "What a shame!" says one,
"That boy should be obliged on foot to run,
While that old chap, on his ass astride,
Should play the calf, and like a bishop ride!"
"Please save your wit," the miller made reply,
"Tough veal, my girls, the calf as old as I."
But joke on joke repeated changed his mind;
So up he took, at last, his son behind.
Not thirty yards ahead, another set
Found fault. "The biggest fools I ever met,"
Says one of them, such burdens to impose.
The ass is faint, and dying with their blows.
Is this, indeed, the mercy which these rustics
Show to their honest, faithful, old domestics?
If to the fair these lazy fellows ride,
"Twill be to sell thereat the donkey's hide!"
"Zounds!" cried the miller, "precious little brains
Has he who takes, to please the world, such pains;
But since we're in, we'll try what can be done."
So off the ass they jumped, himself and son,
And, like a prelate, donkey marched alone.
Another man they met. "These folks," said he,
"Enslave themselves to let their ass go free
The darling brute! If I might be so bold,
I had counsel them to have him set in gold.
Not so went Nicholas his Jane to woo,
Who rode, we sing, his ass to save his shoe."
"Ass! ass!" our man replied; "we're asses three!
I do avow myself an ass to be;
But since my sage advisers can't agree,
Their words henceforth shall not be heeded;
I'll suit myself." And he succeeded.
"For you, choose army, love, or court;
In town, or country, make resort;
Take wife, or cowl; ride you, or walk;
Doubt not but tongues will have their talk."