

THE FARMER'S ASS

By Deb Kidwell



“So long, farewell, auf Wiedersehen, adieu” 2020. In the spirit of the year, I bring you a tale you can read your children and grands, but also serves as a fable for adults. I had saved this story on January 1st, 2016. Ah, how optimistic I was then! I found it in the book, *The Talking Thrush and other tales from India*, collected by W. Crooke, and retold by W.H. Drouse, and published in 1922.

I wish you all a blessed and Merry Christmas, and a blessed New Year.

THERE was once a Farmer, who had an Ass. It was the habit of this Ass to lift up his voice and bray, whenever he heard the church bells a-ringing. Now in the country where this Farmer lived, they used to believe that a man’s soul passes when he dies into an animal, or something else. So this Farmer thought that any Ass that was fond of church bells, must have been a great saint in some former life. Accordingly, he named his Ass St. Anthony.

All his life long, this Ass served the Farmer faithfully, and earned him a great deal of money. At last the Ass died of old age.

The Farmer was very sad and sorry when his Ass died. “My Ass served me faithfully,” said he, “and it’s only

fair he should have a good funeral.” So he sent for the undertaker, and told him to make a big coffin, and put it on a hearse, and buried the Ass with great splendor. Then he shaved off every scrap of hair from his head, as the custom was in those parts when anybody died, and gave a funeral feast to all his relations, and dressed himself in black.

Next time he went to the Grocer’s to buy sugar, the Grocer noticed his head shaved bare, and the black clothes, so he knew some one must be dead, a relation or a great friend.

“I am sorry to see you have lost some one,” said he; “who is it?”

“St. Anthony is dead,” said the Farmer.

“Dear me,” said the Grocer, “and I never heard of it. How very sad!” Thought he to himself, “I had best have my head shaved too, or else people will call me hard-hearted.”

So when the Farmer had bought his sugar, and was gone, the Grocer went to the Barber and had his head shaved. Then he put on a black coat and necktie.

By-and-by a Soldier came to have a chat with his friend the Grocer.

“Ods bobs!” said he, “what’s the matter, man?”

“St. Anthony is dead,” said the Grocer solemnly, and wiped away a tear.

“You don’t say so,” said the Soldier. Off he went straight to the Barber, and made him shave his head; then he bought a piece of crape to tie round his left arm.

He told the news to all the men of his regiment, and they all felt so much sympathy with this soldier that they shaved their heads too.

Next day on parade, there was the whole regiment shaved to a man.

“What’s the meaning of this?” asked the General.

The Sergeant saluted, and told him that St. Anthony was dead.

“Is he? By Jove,” said the General, “then I dismiss this parade,” and off he galloped on his war-horse to the nearest Barber, who shaved his head like the men’s. On the way back, he saw the Prime Minister going to Court. “May I ask,” said the Prime Minister suavely, “to what untoward circumstance is due the erasure of your capillary covering?”

“St. Anthony is dead,” answered the General.

“Dear, dear,” said the Prime Minister, “you don’t say so. He was doubtless an ornament to the party, and it is meet that I should testify my respect.” Then the Prime Minister too went off to get his head shaved, and appeared before the King without a single hair.

“What’s the matter?” asked the King; “anybody dead,

hey, hey, hey?”

“If it please your Majesty,” said the Prime Minister, “St. Anthony is dead.”

“What a loss for our kingdom,” said the King; “what a loss! what a loss! Excuse me a moment,” and away he went to get his head shaved.

When the Queen saw him, she wanted to know why his head was shaved.

“St. Anthony is dead,” answered the King.

“And who is St. Anthony?” asked the Queen.

“I don’t know who he is,” said the King, “a friend of the Prime Minister’s.”

So the Prime Minister was asked who St. Anthony was; and replied that he did not himself know him, but the General spoke of him in the highest terms. The General said that St. Anthony was not a personal friend, but he was well known in the regiment. After inquiry amongst the men, it was found that only one of them could tell anything about St. Anthony, and all he knew was that his friend the Grocer shaved his head in memory of him. The Grocer referred them to the Farmer, and the Farmer was out in the fields.

Then the King sent a messenger on horseback to find the Farmer and bring him to court. The Farmer was brought into court, and when he saw the King and the Prime Minister and General all in mourning, he was very much surprised. The King said to him, “Farmer, who is St. Anthony?”

“If it please your Majesty, he was my Ass.”

The King, and the Prime Minister, and the General felt very foolish to have gone into mourning for an Ass. They put off their black clothes, but it was not so easy to get their hair back again; and so for a month or two the King, and the Prime Minister, and the General, and all the regiment of Body Guards, went about in wigs.



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