LUTHER'S FABLE OF THE LION AND THE ASS.¹

TRANSLATED BY W. H. CARRUTH.

THE OLD LION fell ill and summoned all the animals to attend his last diet and to make his heir, the young lion, king in his stead. The animals came obediently and accepted the old lion's last will. But after the old lion was dead and buried with splendor befitting a king, there came forward certain false and faithless counsellors of the king, who had received many favors at his hands and been helped by him to great honors. These now sought to lead a lawless life and to rule in the kingdom after their own pleasure, and wished therefore no lion for king, saying: "Nolumus hunc regnare super nos" (We do not wish this one to reign over us). They pointed out what a cruel sway the lions had held hitherto, how they had torn and eaten innocent animals, so that no one could feel secure from them. Thus it is wont to be: that of those in authority all the good is suppressed and only the evil is reported.

From these remarks a great murmur arose among all the estates of the kingdom; some wished to keep the young lion, but the great part were even fain to try another. At last they were called together that they might choose according to the word of the

¹Luther had serious misgivings when he established among the Protestants the principle of making the sovereign of each country summus episcopus, or head of the church, but in those disturbed times he saw no other way of arranging the matter. Since his policy has become one of the strongest foundation-stones of secular church government he is generally believed to have upheld the idea of a monarchical government "by God's grace." However, the fable of the "Lion and the Ass," which is scarcely ever mentioned, let alone read in the religious curriculum of the Lutheran schools of Germany, proves that Luther had very radical views on questions of politics and government.

This fable was printed, according to the best authorities, in 1528, two years before Luther applied himself to the editing of the old collection known as Æsop's Fables, and bore the title "A New Fable of Æsop, recently found in German."
greater number and quiet the matter. Thereupon the false, faith-
less counsellors made the fox their speaker, who should say their
word before the estates of the kingdom, and gave him cunning in-
structions and directions how he should nominate the ass. At first,
indeed, it seemed laughable even to the fox that an ass should be
king; but when he heard their considerations: how independent
they could be under the rule of the ass and could sway him as
they would, the knave liked the prospect and helped faithfully,
pondering how he should present the matter cleverly.

The fox appeared before the estates of the kingdom, cleared
his throat, and, calling for silence, began to speak of the dangers
and difficulties of the kingdom, and implied by his whole speech
that it was all the king's fault, and he ran down the lion family so
that the populace quite fell away from them. But when a great
doubt arose as to which animal should be chosen, he again called
for silence and attention and proposed the ass family, and spent a
good hour praising the ass, saying that the ass was neither proud
nor tyrannical, did much work, was patient and humble, admitted
the consequence of other animals, was not hard to keep, neither
was he cruel and did not devour other animals, and was satisfied
with little homage and low taxes.

Now when the fox observed that this tickled the populace and
pleased them well, he capped the climax by saying: "Besides,
gentlemen, we have to consider that he is, perchance, appointed
and created by God for this office; this may be seen in the fact
that he bears forever the cross upon his back."

When the fox referred to the cross all the estates of the king-
dom were astonished, and shouted with loud acclaim: "Now we
have found our proper king, who can manage both civil and eccles-
astiical matters." Then each commended something in the ass;
one said that he had fine long ears which would be good for hear-
ing confession; another said that he had a good voice which would
be fit for preaching and singing in church. Indeed there was noth-
ing about the ass that did not seem worthy of royal and papal hon-
or. But above all other virtues shone the cross on his back. So
the ass was chosen king among the animals.

An outcast orphan, the poor young lion went forth from his
ancestral realm wretched and sorrowful, until certain faithful and
devoted old counsellors, who were offended by the affair, took pity
on him, and agreed that it was an abominable shame to let the
young king be expelled in such a disgraceful way; his father had
deserved better of them. They decided, too, that it must not go in
the kingdom as the fox and his fellows willed, seeking only their own pleasure and not the honor of the kingdom. They encouraged one another and called the estates together, saying they had some necessary business to propose. Then the eldest, an old dog, a faithful counsellor of the old lion, came forward and declared in a beautiful speech that the election of the ass had been too sudden and hasty, and that a great wrong had been done the lion, adding that all is not gold that glitters.

The dog argued: "The ass, although he has the cross on his back, may be a fraud with nothing behind it, as indeed all the world is deceived by glitter and fine appearances. The lion has proven his many virtues by deeds, but the ass has never shown any deed. Look well to it, therefore, that you do not choose a king who is only a graven image, which also can bear a cross. And if a war should arise, you do not know what good the mere cross will do if there is nothing to back it."

This serious, brave speech from the dog affected Master Omnes. The fox and the faithless counsellors grew uneasy, and declared that what was once done in the kingdom should stand; but nevertheless the masses were influenced by the consideration that the ass had never shown forth any deed, and that the cross might indeed have deceived them, and yet they could not cancel the election.

As the dog insisted so strongly on the deed and the fraud of the cross, a proposition was agreed to that the ass should fight with the lion for the kingdom, the one that conquered to be king; there was no other way to manage, since the election had already taken place. At this the young lion again took heart, and all his devoted subjects were full of hope. But the fox and his fellows hung their tails, for they did not expect much knightly combat from their new king, unless the contest were in thistle-chewing. The day of combat was set, and all the animals came to the place. The fox supported the ass; the dog, the lion.

The ass let the lion choose the contest. The lion said, "Well, let it be: whichever jumps over this brook, without wetting a foot, shall be the winner. Now it was a broad brook. The lion took a start and sprang over as a bird might fly across. The ass and the fox thought: "Well, we were not kings before, daring wins, daring loses"; he had to jump, and jumped with a splash into the middle of the brook, as a block would fall in. The lion jumped about on the bank and cried out: "I guess his foot is wet." But now behold what luck and cunning can do. While under the water
a little fish had become entangled and caught in the ass's ear; so
when the ass crept out of the brook and the animals had had a
good laugh at his jump, the fox sees the ass shake the fish out of
his ear, and begins and speaks: "Be still and harken:

"Where now are those who despise the cross, saying that it
can show no deed? My lord, King Ass, says he might also have
undertaken to spring across the brook, but that would have been a
poor device in his eyes to prove the virtue of his cross; but seeing
on his jump a fish in the brook, he sprang after it, and that the mi-
raculous power of his cross should be the greater, he undertook to
catch it with his ear instead of with his mouth or his paw. Let the
lion do as much, and then he may be king. But I think with his
mouth and all four claws he could not catch a fish, not even if he
went after it, to say nothing of catching it on the jump."

With such babble the fox again created confusion, and the
cross was on the point of winning. The dog was vexed with his
ill luck, but still more with the fact that the treacherous fox, with
his foxy ways, had so befooled the multitude, and he began to be-
low that it had come about thus by chance, and was no miracle.

But lest a riot should ensue from the snarling and snapping of
the fox and the dog, it was considered well that the lion and the
ass should go alone to some place and have their contest there.

They proceeded to a wood within the peace and safe-conduct
of the kingdom. "The test shall be," said the lion, "which one
can catch the swiftest animal." And he ran into the wood and
chaired until he caught a hare. The lazy ass, however, thought:
the kingdom is going to cost me too much pains; I am to have no
peace if things go in this fashion. So he lay down in the sun
where he was, and let his tongue hang out for the great heat. A
raven comes that way, and, thinking it is a carrion, alights upon
his lips and is about to eat, whereupon the ass snaps his jaws to
and catches the raven. Now when the lion comes running joyfully
with his hare, he finds the raven in the ass's mouth, and is dis-
mayed. In short, the game was lost, and he himself began to have
a dread of the ass's cross.

The lion, however, did not like to give up his kingdom, and
said: "Dear Ass, one more test for the sake of good fellowship;
they say all good things go by threes." Half from fear because he
was alone with him, the ass accepted the proposal.

The lion said: "On the other side of this mountain stands a
mill; whichever gets there first shall be winner; will you go around
the foot or over the top of the mountain?" The ass said: "You
go over the mountain." As in his last struggle, the lion ran with all his might and main. But the ass stood where he was, and thought: if I run I shall only be laughed at, and wear my legs out besides; I see the lion is not willing to concede me the honor, and I do not care to labor in vain.

When the lion reached the other side of the mountain he saw another ass standing before the mill. "Aha!" says he, "has the devil already gotten you here?" and he shouted: "Very good; back once more to the starting point!"

Having crossed the mountain, once more he saw the ass still standing there. "A third time, then," he cried, "back to the mill!" There he saw the ass standing a third time, and had to confess him victor and admit that there is no jesting with the cross.

So the ass remained king, and to this day his family reigns with a strong hand among the beasts of the world.