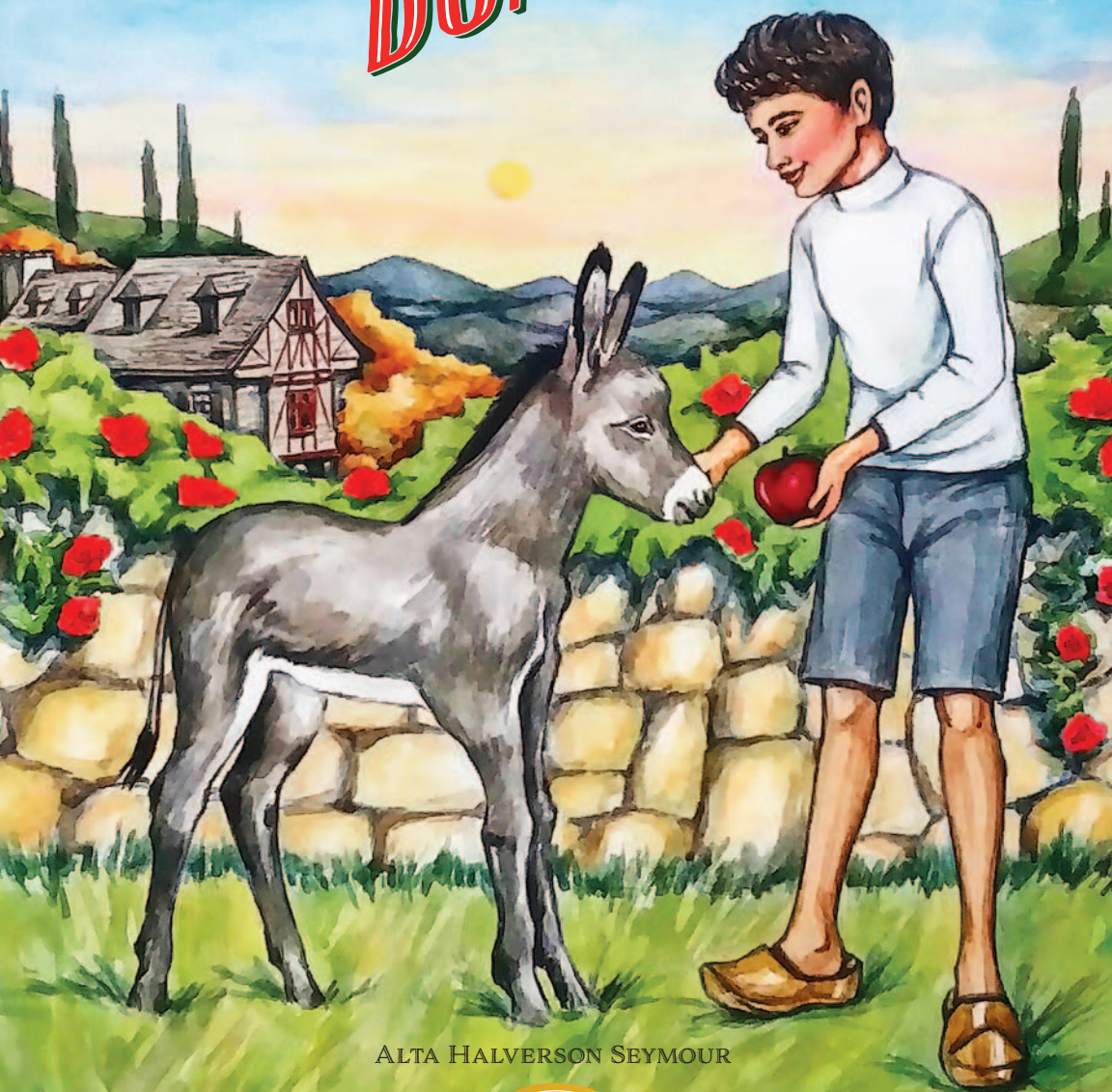



THE CHRISTMAS DONKEY



ALTA HALVERSON SEYMOUR

Purple House Press

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THE
CHRISTMAS
DONKEY





ALTA HALVERSON SEYMOUR

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THE CHRISTMAS DONKEY



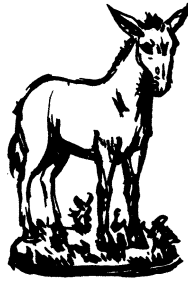
ALTA HALVERSON SEYMOUR

illustrated by W.T. Mars

Purple House Press
Kentucky

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	7
Chapter 2	18
Chapter 3	31
Chapter 4	41
Chapter 5	52
Chapter 6	64
Chapter 7	77
Chapter 8	88
Chapter 9	100
Chapter 10	114
Pain d'Épices Recipe	129
More Christmas Around the World books	130



CHAPTER 1

“IT’S ALL VERY WELL for you to talk, Julie Duchard! Your papa has a donkey and two goats, a dozen hens and a rooster and rabbits, and two good pieces of land and everything—and four children besides. But my grand’maman just rents a little garden patch outside the village, and at home has a few fruit and olive trees and some rabbits and two hens—and me. She ought to have a donkey, like other folks.”

Julie considered this thoughtfully, her curly head on one side. “That’s true, Michel. And of course you aren’t really her grandson even—just a kind of foster grandson.”

Michel’s dark eyes were much more likely to twinkle than to flash, but they were stormy now. He stopped in the middle of the narrow, dusty road, thrust his hands into his pockets, and looked indignantly at the little girl trudging along beside him. “She *is* too my grand’maman—the best there is. Don’t you dare say she isn’t! She took

me in long ago—right in wartime when nobody had enough to eat and I wasn't much more than a baby. Nobody else bothered! And she's my grand'maman! And somehow I'm going to get her a donkey!" he ended fiercely.

Luckily Julie was good-natured or there might have been a real quarrel. "Oh, Michel, you do look so funny when you're mad!" she giggled, and added soothingly, "I know people need donkeys, and I think it would be fine if you could get one for her. We all know Grand'maman Probet is more than good to you."

"She is the best grand'maman in all of France. And I am going to get her a donkey all right—and a donkey cart!" Michel added recklessly. "Then I can work carting loads and earn money for her. I can get firewood and kindling and garden stuff and everything!" It was an enchanting picture, and Michel beamed as he added details. "And Sundays I can take her riding."

"But how can you do it? You're only eleven—still in school. How are you going to get a donkey for your grand'maman?"

"Somehow!" said Michel firmly. "You just wait, and you'll see. And you needn't sound so grown-up—you're only eleven yourself."

The road along which they walked was steep and

narrow, for Aumont, where they lived, was in the mountainous country of southeastern France, not far from the blue Mediterranean.

Now a clip-clop of hoofs behind them made the two step aside. Michel's eyes glistened, for here came the one little donkey he felt sure was the most beautiful in the whole countryside. It was Grisette, who belonged to Hector Garnier, owner also of the little café which faced the village square. She was stepping daintily along as if the cart behind her carried no weight. And indeed this was almost the case, for it was piled high with hay from a small grassy plain above the village.

"*Holà*, Hector!" called both children, and the man walking beside the cart responded with a merry, "*Holà*, you two! Get up on the hayload if you like, Julie. You are not heavy, and the road slopes."

"And me? Can I lead Grisette?" asked Michel eagerly.

"Take the lines then, boy. But have a care! You know how well I love my little Grisette, the pretty *petite*."

"I also," said Michel, and he felt both cheerful and important as he walked beside the gray donkey.

Aumont was only a small village, but it had its square with the church facing it. Hector's café was there, and another one, which included the post office and where a few other small items were also sold.

In the center of the square was a wonderful fountain with four spouts. Michel didn't know that it was almost four hundred years old, but he did know that the water was piped from a mountain stream and was cold and delicious. It was the source of supply for the villagers, and here the women came to wash clothes in the *lavoir*, the little laundry shed which sheltered the overflow



from the fountain. Michel liked to watch them kneel and soap the clothes, beating them with wooden paddles, talking vociferously to their neighbors as they worked there together. Julie was very proud that her mother now often allowed her to assist, for one had to be pretty grown-up to help in this important work. Besides, the visiting that went on was fun.

Here too the village animals—donkeys and goats, cows and sheep—were led or wandered by themselves to drink.

Michel left his companions at the village square, but not without a wistful look at Hector's café. He knew that on the shelves behind the little tables were sardines and candles, vinegar and coffee, and a few other groceries. Hector's stock was small, for nearly everybody went to town on market day, taking their fruit or rabbits or a few vegetables or whatever else they had to sell and bringing back a good share of the week's supply of groceries. But Hector always had a little nougat, Michel's favorite candy, and Michel's sweet tooth longed for some today, as indeed it usually did. But though his pockets contained many other things, they didn't contain any money. So he said good-bye to Hector and Julie and started home. Maybe Grand'maman would have some of the small, thin pancakes for supper with wild strawberry preserves.

But no, it was soup again tonight. He sniffed the air as he neared the open door of the cottage, and hurried on in anticipation. Grand'maman was an expert at making soup. He had often watched her do it. Olive oil went into the pot first, then finely chopped onions, pepper and salt and garlic and parsley, string beans and potatoes and cauliflower—any vegetables she could muster—all cut fine and cooked slowly in water, added a little at a time. If there was a small piece of meat, all the better; but Grand'maman could make good soup even without meat.

Michel always began to feel happy when he got near home. He loved the old cottage with its thick masonry walls, its faded tile roof, its small, well-tended garden with all the vegetables Grand'maman could crowd into it and a row of petunias besides. On the slope behind it were a few gnarled gray olive trees which gave them oil for their use and a little to sell. An almond tree grew there also, pink in the spring among the gray olive trees, green now, like the pear and peach tree which grew near it. A thrifty fig tree shaded the door, and grapevines were carefully trained along the fence.

Grand'maman was standing in the doorway, tall and straight in her neat black dress, its full skirt protected by a large white apron. Her fingers were flying as she

knit the socks which she would take to town on market day. These beautifully knit socks of hers, with their fine ancient designs, were much in demand by tourists and skiers.

She had tried to teach Michel to knit, assuring him that plenty of boys knew how. But Michel felt it was girls' work, and his fingers, clever enough at some things, fumbled the needles and tangled the wool till she gave it up.

“*Holà*, Grand'maman!” he called now. “Is the soup ready?” He peered around behind her to where the iron pot was steaming over the fire.

“It is that! And did you bring the fresh water from the fountain?”

Michel stopped and bit his lip remorsefully. He had been so busy making plans about the donkey that he had completely forgotten to bring the water.

“Grand'maman, I left the pail there ready, on my way up to the garden, but I forgot. But I did bring a couple of fine tomatoes. And I am sure some cauliflower will be ready for market next week.”

“*Bien!* Run then for the water. And bring also a loaf of bread from Hector. Remember not to use it as a cane,” she added, her eyes twinkling. For the loaves of bread were long and crisp, and Michel had more than

once come running along pounding the yard-long loaf on the ground beside him as he ran.

He nodded soberly. Then he glanced up sidewise and grinned. Grand'maman tried to shake her head at him reproachfully, but that half-rueful grin was too much for her, and both of them burst out laughing.

"I will pay Hector myself, tell him," said Grand'maman, folding up her knitting. "The last time you lost some of the money. Run now, Michel."

The boy was off like a shot. Maybe he wasn't much of a fellow. He had lost a franc that time, and he had dragged the bread and forgotten the water more than once. But just wait till he got that donkey for Grand'maman! That would make up for everything.

Just how he was to do it he had not the least idea, for he had not a *sou* to his name. Grand'maman always saved a little each time she sold a bit of olive oil or some fruit or a few heads of cauliflower or a half-dozen pairs of socks, but that was carefully put aside for taxes and other necessities. She certainly would not spend it on a donkey, he knew that very well.

When he returned with the water, Grand'maman ladled the thick soup into two deep earthen bowls. Michel smacked his lips over the delicious soup, but he had so little to say all through supper that Grand'maman

looked at him questioningly more than once. She often told him his tongue must be fastened in the middle and loose on both ends at the rate he talked. But tonight he ate his soup and a plate of fresh ripe figs in silence.

It was not until supper was over and he was holding wool for Grand'maman to wind that he brought out his question. "Grand'maman," he said, looking at her earnestly, "wouldn't you like to have a donkey?"



“To be sure I would, Michel. Who would not? With a donkey you could do many errands for people—carrying small loads of kindling and firewood and hay and all sorts of things. And we could bring our vegetables from the garden patch and take produce in on market day. Oh, a donkey would be a very useful member of the family.”

“Yes, and they’re so funny and cute. They seem to wink at you and understand what you are saying.”

“All that is true. But you and I, Michel, I do not see how we are going to afford a donkey.” She shook her head regretfully. “I have often thought a goat would be nice. Do you remember the one we used to have? One could then have milk, and perhaps one could even get a little goat-cart and—”

“But a donkey—that would be much better. With a donkey we could earn enough money to buy a goat.”

Grand’maman laughed. “All right, Michel,” she said good-humoredly. “You get me a donkey. I should like one for Christmas. That ought to give you plenty of time. Christmas is several months away.”

But he didn’t smile back or even look up. He was whispering something under his breath. “September—October—November—December!” He counted off each month on a finger.

“Michel!” said Grand’maman. “You are surely not serious. Do you think I expect to find a little donkey in my wooden shoe on the hearth at Christmas?”

She laughed, and Michel laughed too. What an idea! A donkey in Grand’maman’s wooden sabot! Even the good *Papa Noël*, who was supposed to leave presents in wooden shoes at Christmas, could hardly manage such a thing as that.

Grand’maman might treat the whole thing as a joke—as indeed they often did treat things. But this time Michel was soberly in earnest. Grand’maman really wanted a donkey as much as he wanted to get it for her. He had found out that much for sure. So now the next thing was to set about getting it. He must certainly be able to find some way. He would get it and surprise Grand’maman. And by Christmas, if possible.



Eleven-year-old Michel knows his grand'maman is the best in all France. And she deserves a donkey just like everyone else. A donkey would be a great help carrying loads of wood and kindling, fruits and vegetables, and it could even pull a little cart to take them for a Sunday ride.

But how could he get a donkey? They cost a good deal of money and it would take a long while to earn, even working two jobs. Yet Christmas is four months away!

Michel is short of money, but he has plenty of determination and is not afraid to work. Everyone will be delighted at how he manages to make this Christmas a special one for his grand'maman. Full of love, this story makes a heartwarming read-aloud the whole year through.

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