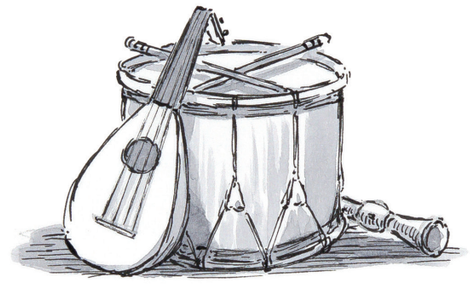
THE BREMEN TOWN MUSICIANS



A man once had a donkey who had patiently carried sacks to the mill for years and years, but the donkey was worn out and able to do less and less work. Then his master decided to stop feeding him. The donkey, though, knew that something was in the wind, so he ran away, and set out for Bremen: there, he

thought, he could become a town musician.

When he had walked for a while, the donkey came across a hound, lying by the roadside, who was panting like someone who had run for miles and miles. "Why are you panting like that, snapper?" asked the donkey.



"Alas!" said the hound. "Because I am old and growing weaker each day, and can't go hunting any longer, my master was going to put me down, and so I've run away. But now, how can I make my living?"

"I've an idea," said the donkey. "I'm going to Bremen to be a town musician. Come with me and you can be a musician, too.

I'll play the flute and you can play the kettle-drum."

The hound was well pleased, and they set off together. It wasn't long before they came across a cat sitting on the road and pulling a face as long as a month of Sundays. "Now what's wrong with you, old whisker-licker?" said the donkey.

"Who can be happy when he is in for it?" replied the cat. "Because I'm old, and my teeth are blunt and I prefer not to hunt mice but sit behind the stove and spin, my mistress wanted to get rid of me, so I left home. Now I need some good advice: where shall I go?"

"Come with us to Bremen. You know a thing or two about night-music, and you can become a town musician there."

The cat liked this idea and set off with them. Then the three refugees passed by a farm where a rooster was sitting on the gate and crowing to high heaven.

"That sound sends a chill to the marrow-bone," said the donkey. "What's the reason for it?"

"I've woken the farm at dawn every day of my working life," said the rooster. "But because we have guests tomorrow, and as it's Sunday, the mistress of the house won't spare me. She has

told the cook that she wants chicken-stew tomorrow, and so she needs me for the pot. Now I'm crowing for all I'm worth while I still can."

"Fiddlesticks, redhead!" said the donkey. "You would do better to come along with us. We're going to Bremen, and you'll find something better than death wherever you go. You've a fine voice, and when we all make music together, we should make a good sound."

The rooster liked this idea, and all four of them set off together. They were unable, though, to reach the town of Bremen in one day and that evening they came to a forest where they thought they would spend the night. The donkey and the hound lay down under a big tree, and the cat and the rooster made for the branches, but the rooster flew to the top of the tree – the safest place for him. Before he went to sleep, he looked around in all four directions, and then he thought he could make out a light burning in the distance. He called out to his companions that there must be a house not far away because a light was shining.

"It's pretty poor shelter here," said the donkey. "So let's get up and head to it, late as it is."

The hound said he could do with a couple of bones into the bargain, with some meat on them. So they set off in the direction of the light. They soon saw it gleaming more brightly, and it got bigger from moment to moment, until they were standing in front of a brightly-lit thieves' kitchen.

Being the largest, the donkey edged up to the window and peered in.

"What can you see, greyhair?" asked the rooster.

"What can I see?" replied the donkey. "A table laden with good things to eat and drink and robbers sitting around it enjoying themselves."

"Just the thing for us," said the rooster.

Then the animals discussed how they could manage to chase away the robbers, and at last they hit upon an idea. The donkey had to plant his forelegs on the window-ledge, the hound had to jump on to the donkey's back, and the cat had to scramble on to the hound, and finally the rooster flew up and perched on the head of the cat. When they had done this, at a given signal they all began to make their music together; the donkey brayed, the hound barked, the cat miaowed, the rooster crowed; then they



launched themselves through the window into the kitchen, so that the panes were shattered.

The robbers leaped up at this appalling hullaballoo. They were quite convinced that a ghost had come in, and fled to the forest in complete terror. And the four companions sat down at the table, and contented themselves with what was left over; they ate as if they were about to fast for the next four weeks.

When the four minstrels had finished, they extinguished the light and looked for a good place to sleep, each according to his nature and inclination. The donkey lay down on the dunghill, the hound behind the door, the cat on the stove by the glowing embers, and the rooster perched on the rafters; and because they were tired after their long journey, they soon fell asleep.

After midnight the robbers saw from a distance that there was no longer a light burning in the house, and everything seemed to be quiet. "We shouldn't have been scared out of our wits," said their chief, and he instructed one of his men to go and inspect the house. This man found everything quiet. He went into the kitchen to prime the lamp, and because he took the glowing, fiery eyes of the cat to be burning coals, he held out a



taper so as to light it.

But the cat did not see the joke and sprang at his face, spitting and scratching. Then the man was scared to death; he bolted for the back door, but the hound lying there leaped up and bit his leg; and as he ran across the yard past the dunghill, the donkey gave him the devil of a kick with his hind leg; and the rooster, who had been disturbed by this racket and was now fully awake, shouted down from his rafter, *"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"*

The robber ran back to his chief as fast as he could and said, "Oh! There's a frightful witch in the house. She breathed all over me and scratched my face with her long fingers; and standing in

front of the door, there is a man with a knife who stabbed me in the leg; and lying in the yard there is a black monster who attacked me with a cudgel; and up in the rafters sits a judge who shouts, 'Bring the rogue here to me'. So then I made off as fast as I could."

From then on, the robbers no longer dared to go into the house, and the four Bremen musicians felt so comfortable there that they had not the least wish to leave the place again.

THE HEDGE-KING



Long, long ago, every sound still had its own purpose and meaning. When the smith's hammer rang, it called, "Smite me too!" When the carpenter's plane shaved, it said, "It's through! It's through!" The mill wheel began to clatter and said, "Dear God,

help me! Dear God, help me!" And if the miller set the mill in motion meaning to cheat someone, the wheel spoke in the most refined way and first asked slowly, "Who is there? Who is there?" Then it quickly answered, "The miller! The miller!" And finally, at top speed, "Brave robber, brave robber, three-sixths from an eighth!"

At this time the birds also had their own language, and everyone understood it. Now, it sounds only like twittering, screeching and whistling or, in the case of a few birds, like music without words.

The birds decided that they did not want to do without a ruler any longer and that they would elect one amongst them to be their king. Only one of them, the peewit, was against it: he had lived free and wanted to die free and, anxiously flying to and fro, he called out, "Where shall I go? Where shall I go?" He retired to lonely, unfrequented marshes and did not show himself amongst his fellows again.

The birds were eager to discuss the matter, and one beautiful May morning, they all gathered from the forests and fields, the eagle and the chaffinch, owl and crow, lark and sparrow – why

should I name them all? Even the cuckoo came and the hoopoe; and a very little bird, who had no name yet, also mingled with the company.

The hen, who had only heard about the whole business by chance, was astonished by the big assembly.

"What, what is going on here?" she clucked, but the cockerel reassured his dear wife and said, "Only rich people," and then he told her what they had in mind.

It was decided that the king should be the one who was able to fly the highest. When he heard that, the frog sitting in the thicket croaked in warning, "Not, not, not! Not, not, not!"



because he thought this idea would only lead to tears. But the crow said, "*Quark* OK," everything would be settled peaceably.

The birds agreed that they should take advantage of the beautiful morning and set off at once, so that none of them could say afterwards, "I would have flown even higher, but darkness fell, and I couldn't go on."

At a given signal, the whole flock soared into the air. Dust kicked up from the fields, there was a great rushing and swishing and beating of wings, and it looked as if a black cloud were passing overhead. But the little birds were soon left behind; they could fly no further and fell back to earth again. The larger ones lasted longer, but none could rival the eagle, who climbed so high that he could have pecked out the sun's eyes. And when he saw that the others could not keep up with him, the eagle thought, "Why should you fly yet higher? It's clear enough that you are king," and he began to wheel down to earth again.

The birds beneath all cried at once, "You must be our king; none has flown higher than you."

"Except me," cried the little fellow without a name, who had concealed himself in the breast feathers of the eagle. And



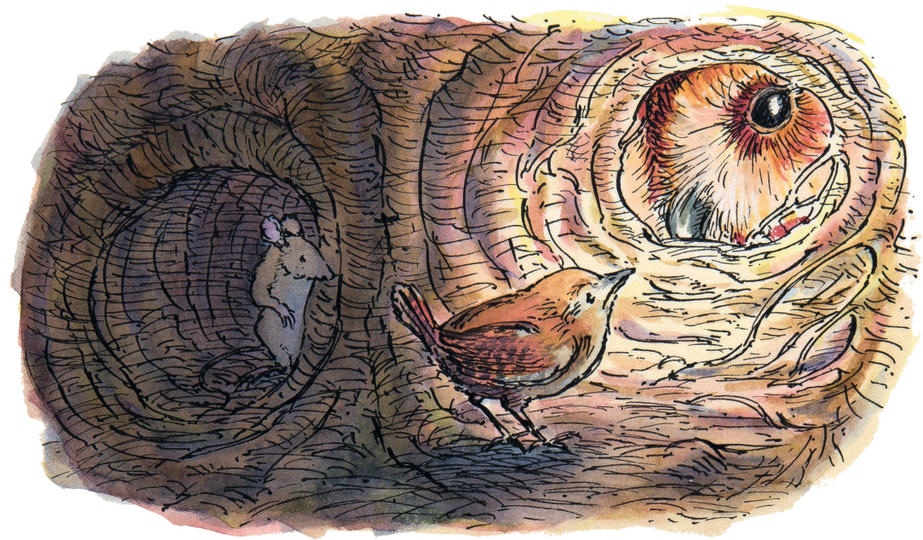
because he was not tired, he climbed and climbed and climbed so high that he could see God sitting at His throne. And when he had completed his ascent, he folded his wings and dropped out of the sky and shouted down in his piercing little voice, "I'm the king! I'm the king!"

"You, our king?" cried the birds angrily. "You've managed this by cheating and trickery." So they settled on another plan that the one who was able to delve deepest into the earth should be their king. How the goose slapped her broad breast against the soil! How the cockerel scratched a hole!

The duck came off the worst: she jumped into a ditch but sprained her ankles, and waddled off to a nearby pond crying, "What a piece of work! What a piece of work!" But the little bird without a name hunted for a mousehole, crept down it and said in his little voice, "I'm the king! I'm the king!"

"You, our king?" shouted the birds even more angrily. "Do you think that your tricks will get you anywhere?"

They decided to keep the little bird prisoner in his hole. The owl was placed as warder in front of the hole and told that she was not to let the little wretch out, on pain of death.



When evening came, the birds were completely worn out after their flight, and went to bed with their wives and children. The owl stayed alone by the mousehole and looked into it with her great unblinking eyes. After a while, though, she grew tired too, and thought, "One eye will do; yes, and then you can keep watch with the other one, and the little devil won't get out of his hole!" So she closed one eye and fixed the other on the mousehole.

The little wretch popped his head out, ready to make a getaway, but the owl at once blocked his way, and he withdrew his head again. Then, once more, the owl opened one eye and closed the other; she meant to go on in this way all night long. But when she closed one eye the next time, she forgot to open the other, and as soon as both eyes were closed, she fell asleep. The little bird soon saw that, and crept away.

From that time on, the owl has no longer let herself be seen by day, otherwise the other birds would chase her and ruffle her feathers. She only flies out at night, and she hates and persecutes mice because they make such horrible holes.

The little bird does not let himself be seen either because he is afraid that he would be in for it if he were caught. He hops around in the hedgerows, and when he feels completely safe, he sometimes calls out, "I'm the king!" And that is why the other birds mockingly call him the hedge-king even though we call him the wren.

But no one was happier than the lark that she did not have to obey the hedge-king. As soon as the sun comes out, she climbs into the sky and cries, "Ah, how beautiful it is! Beautiful! Beautiful! Ah, how beautiful it is!"