

When God had created the world and was about to fix the length of each creature's life, the ass came and asked, "Lord, how long shall I live?" "Thirty years," replied God; "does that content thee?" "Ah, Lord," answered the ass, "that is a long time. Think of my painful existence! To carry heavy burdens from morning to night, to drag sacks of corn to the mill, that others may eat bread, to be cheered and refreshed with nothing but blows and kicks. Relieve me of a portion of this long time." Then God had pity on him and relieved him of eighteen years. The ass went away comforted, and the dog appeared. "How long wouldst thou like to live?" said God to him. "Thirty years are too many for the ass, but thou wilt be satisfied with that." "Lord," answered the dog, "is that thy will? Consider how I shall have to run, my feet will never hold out so long, and when I have once lost my voice for barking, and my teeth for biting, what will be left for me to do but run from one corner to another and growl?" God saw that he was right, and released him from twelve years of life. Then came the monkey. "Thou wilt certainly live thirty years willingly?" said the Lord to him. "Thou hast no need to work as the ass and the dog have to do, and wilt always enjoy thyself." "Ah! Lord," he answered, "it may seem as if that were the case, but it is quite different. When it rains porridge I have no spoon. I am always to play merry pranks, and make faces which force people to laugh, and if they give me an apple, and I bite into it, why it is sour! How often sadness hides itself behind mirth! I shall never be able to hold out for thirty years." God was gracious and took off ten.

At last man appeared, joyous, healthy and vigorous, and begged God to appoint his time for him. "Thirty years shalt thou live," said the Lord. "Is that enough for thee?" "What a short time," cried man, "when I have built my house and my fire burns on my own hearth; when I have planted trees which blossom and bear fruit, and am just intending to enjoy my life, I am to die! O Lord, lengthen my time." "I will add to it the ass's eighteen years," said God. "That is not enough," replied the man. "Thou shalt also have the dog's twelve years." "Still too little!" "Well, then," said God, "I will give thee the monkey's ten years also, but more thou shalt not have." The man went away, but was not satisfied.

So man lives seventy years. The first thirty are his human years, which are soon gone; then is he healthy, merry, works with pleasure, and is glad of his life. Then follow the ass's eighteen years, when one burden after another is laid on him, he has to carry the corn which feeds others, and blows and kicks are the reward of his faithful services. Then come the dog's twelve years, when he lies in the corner, and growls and has no longer any teeth to bite with, and when this time is over the monkey's ten years form the end. Then man is weak-headed and foolish, does silly things, and becomes the jest of the children.