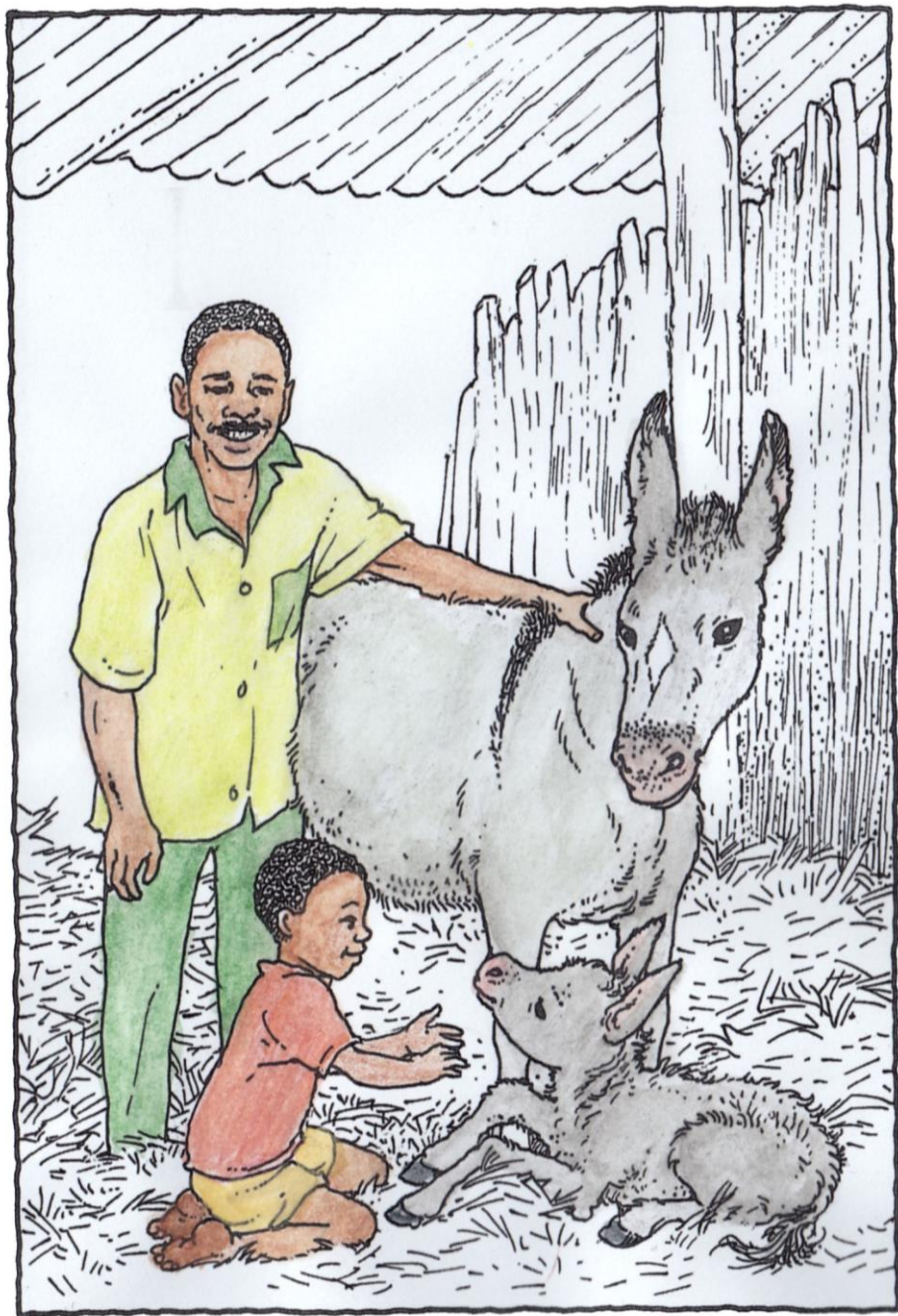


The Precious Gift



by Peta Jones



The Little Donkey

Thabo was 3 years old when his father's donkey had a baby foal. Thabo's father said he could give the foal a name and look after it himself. He told Thabo that in the olden days, kings and noblemen rode donkeys. "Humans are very lucky that donkeys are able to work for us. They need to be well looked after, in return for all their work," he said.

Thabo called the little donkey Chipu, meaning 'gift'. Thabo's father showed him how to get Chipu used to having his feet and eyes touched. He explained that this was necessary because sometimes donkeys' hoofs need to be cleaned when they fill up with mud, or get thorns stuck inside them. Their eyes need to be washed when there is too much dust and too many flies that cause donkeys to weep.

Thabo loved the silky coat Chipu had when he was little, and the velvet skin around Chipu's mouth. Holding his hand flat, Thabo would give Chipu little bits of food. Chipu would take it from Thabo's hand with his soft, gentle lips. Soon, when he saw Thabo coming, Chipu would bray loudly in greeting.



Chipo grew up faster than Thabo, but Thabo's father warned him that Chipo's bones were not yet strong. If he was put to work too young, carrying heavy loads, his bones would become twisted, and this would give him pain for the rest of his life. If Chipo was well cared for, his life would be almost as long as Thabo's, because donkeys can live a very long time.

When Chipo was 4 years old and grown up, he started helping his mother pull Thabo's father's cart. Chipo also helped plough Thabo's mother's field.

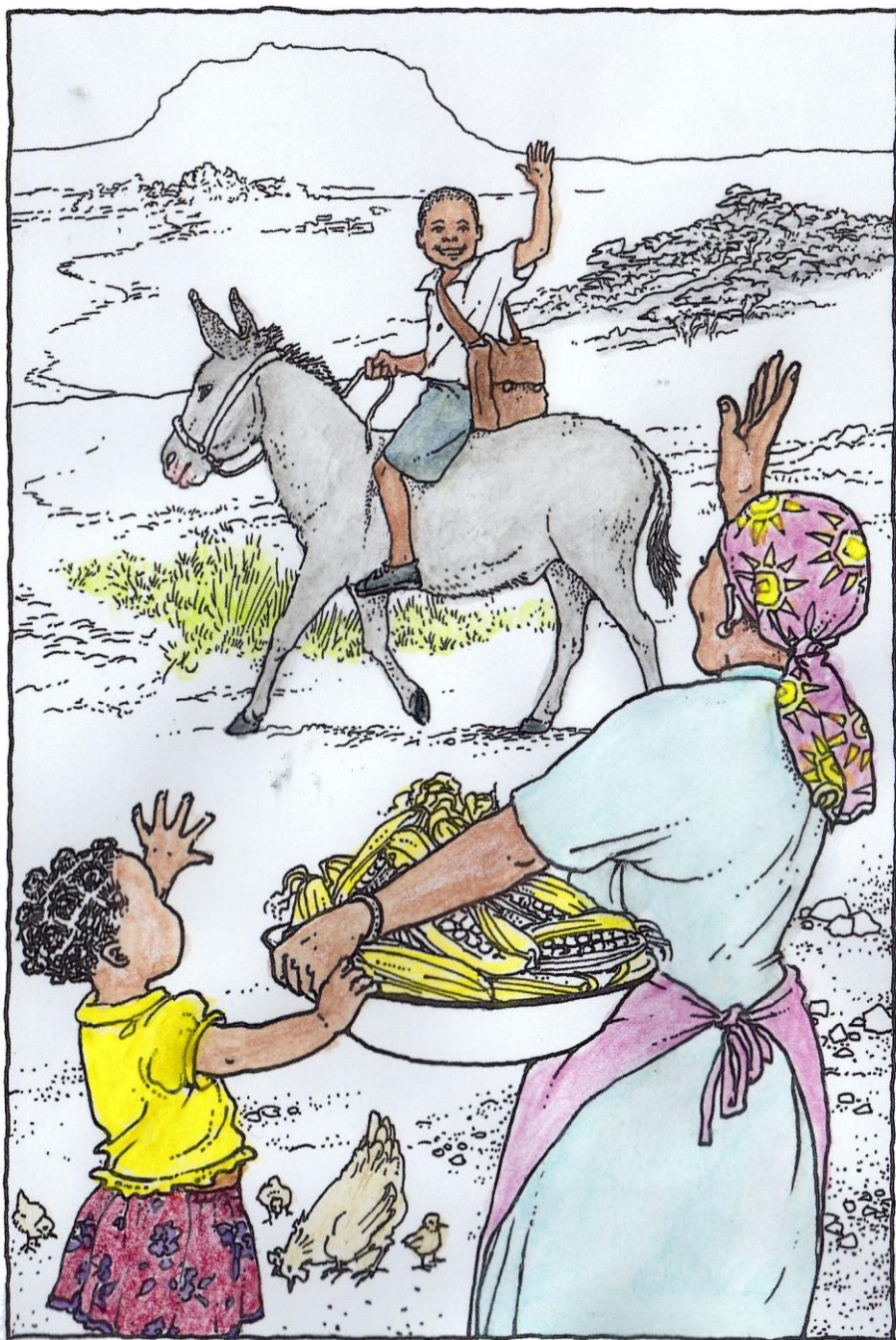
But now Thabo was 7 years old and needed Chipo to take him to school. Thabo had heavy books to carry, but Chipo could carry them and carry Thabo at the same time.

Schooldays

While Thabo learned in school, Chipo learned to find good food on the hill. Dry grass and bush is good food for a donkey. Thabo taught Chipo to come back to school at the same time every day when school closed, to carry him and his books back home.

Some of the children at school laughed at Chipo.





Sally said: "How funny to use a slow old animal. My father brings me in a fast, smart car. I can listen to the radio in the car!"

Other children said: "We come in a taxi, and we listen to music cassettes!"

Phineas said: "My bicycle is shiny and new and stays where I put it. It does not need to eat grass."

But Thabo loved Chipo and Chipo loved Thabo and followed him everywhere. Thabo did not ask his father for a bicycle.

Then one day, riding to school, Thabo passed Sally walking along the road, carrying her heavy books.

"Where is your father's car?" asked Thabo.

"There is no petrol for the car" said Sally sadly. She climbed onto Chipo and rode with Thabo to school.

"Chipo carried me as well as my books!" she told the other children. After that she rode with Thabo almost every day.

On another day, when Thabo and Sally were leaving school, they found Phineas crying.







"My tyre is flat! If I try to ride my bike, the wheel will break!" Phineas left his bicycle at school, and went home on Chipo, riding with Thabo and Sally.

Thabo's father was angry because he thought the load was too much for Chipo. "Three children and all the books are enough for one donkey! If more children ride, or when you grow bigger, the load will be too much. Other children must get their own donkeys," said father.

Phineas spent hours fixing his bicycle. He needed to do this again and again, because the rough roads often gave him a flat tyre and he was often late for school.

One day many children did not arrive in time for school. These were the children that came by taxi. The Headmaster was very worried. He made a telephone call, and told the teachers: "The taxi crashed but, fortunately, nobody was hurt!"

The Taxi

After that, Thabo's father was the taxi driver for the school children, and the donkey cart was the taxi. Sally and Phineas loved this new 'taxi'. All the children at school love donkeys now.





Sometimes the children come to help Thabo and his father feed the fields with donkey manure. This way Thabo's father saves money and grows good crops. They all agree that, in Chipso, Thabo has a very precious gift.

Chipso is never allowed on the main roads, and when he is on any road, Thabo is with him.

At night Chipso has a comfortable place to sleep, where he is safe. Some of the children have asked their own fathers if they can have donkeys, too.

Thabo's father has changed his two-wheel cart for a four-wheel wagon, and can carry even more children to school. If a cart has only two wheels, balancing the load can be a problem, especially for the donkeys. With four wheels this problem is taken away.

For her part, Thabo's mother has been learning to make harnesses by weaving together strips of used supermarket plastic bags. This makes strong straps for harnesses and does not hurt the donkeys.

At the same time, plastic bags have nice bright colours and can easily be washed so that the harnesses stay bright and clean.





This is much better than leaving plastic bags on the ground where they can be eaten by animals. Animals eat them because they smell of food but plastic makes big knots inside their stomachs and can even cause them to die.

Now both the donkeys pulling the wagon wear reflector tape on straps across their foreheads. The wagon has reflectors behind, in case darkness comes before Thabo's father can reach home. Motor cars coming along the road can see a cart if it can reflect their head lights. The wagon also has as a cover to protect the children from rain.

Thabo's father bought a cassette player to play in the wagon, but mostly the children sing.

The End



