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The Beetle

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

The Emperor's horse was being shod with gold; a golden shoe on each foot. Why was he shod with gold?

He was the most beautiful beast, with slender legs, wise eyes, and a mane that hung over his neck like a veil of silk. He had borne his master through the clouds of powder smoke, and the rain of bullets, had heard the balls whistle and scream; had bitten, kicked, joined in the fight when the enemy pressed hard, had leapt with his Emperor over the fallen horse of the foe in a single bound, had saved his Emperor's crown of red gold, saved his Emperor's life that was more precious than the red gold, and that was why the Emperor's horse was shod with gold, a golden shoe on each foot.

The Dung Beetle crawled out.

"First the big ones, then the little ones," said he, "though it's not the size that tells." With which he stuck out his thin leg. "What do *you* want?" asked the Smith.

"Gold shoes," replied the Beetle.

"You haven't slept it off yet," said the Smith. "Do you mean you want gold shoes too?"

"Gold shoes," said the Beetle. "Aren't I as good as that big beast, who must forsooth be waited on and curry-combed and looked after and have his food and his drink? Don't I belong to the Emperor's stable just as much?"

"Yes, but *why* does the horse have gold shoes?" said the Smith. "Don't you understand that?"

"Understand? I understand that it's a piece of spite against me," said the Beetle. "It's an insult, so I shall go out at once into the wide world."

"Cut along," said the Smith.

"Coarse being!" said the Beetle, and went out. He flew a short way and found himself in a pretty little flower garden, fragrant with roses and lavender.

"Isn't it delightful here?" said one of the little Ladybirds who were flying about, with black spots on their red shield-like wing-cases. "How sweet it smells here, and how pretty everything is!"

"I am accustomed to better surroundings," said the Beetle. "Do you call this pretty? Why, there isn't even a dung-heap in the place." So he went further, into the shadow of a large stock. A Caterpillar was creeping over it.

"What a beautiful place the world is!" said the Caterpillar. "The sun is so warm! Everything so pleasant! And when I fall asleep some time, and die, as they call it, I shall wake up and be a butterfly."

"Only fancy!" said the Beetle. "We're going to fly about as butterflies, are we? I come from the Emperor's stables, but nobody there, not even the Emperor's own horse, who by the way goes about in my cast-off shoes, has such ideas. Get wings? Fly? Very well, I *shall* fly." So off he went. "I don't want to get cross, but I am getting cross all the same."

And he plumped down on a large grass plot, where he lay for a little and then went to sleep.

Mercy, what a deluge came pouring down! The Beetle was woken up by the splashing, and tried to get into the ground at once, but couldn't; he rolled about, he floated on his stomach and on his back—there was no question of flying—he was sure he would never get away from the place alive. He lay where he was and did not stir.

When it cleared a little and the Beetle had blinked the water out of his eyes, he got a glimpse of something white—it was linen being bleached. He went towards it and crept into a fold of the wet stuff; it wasn't quite the same as lying in the warm dung-heap in the stable, but there was nothing better to be had on the spot, so he stayed there a whole day and a whole night, and still it rained. In the morning the Beetle crept out; he was extremely cross with the climate.

On the linen were sitting two frogs, whose bright eyes glistened with pure pleasure. "It's divine weather," said one of them. "How it does freshen one up, and the linen holds the water together beautifully; it gives me a quivering in my hind legs as if I was going to swim."

"I should like to know", said the other, "whether the swallow, who flies so far in all directions, has found on his many journeys abroad a better climate than ours. Such drizzle as we get! Such moistness! One might be lying in a wet ditch! Anyone who does not enjoy it is no true lover of his country."

"You have, I suppose, never been in the Emperor's stable?" asked the Beetle. "There there is both moisture and fragrance. That is what I am accustomed to; that is the climate for me, but it is impossible to take it with one on a journey. Is there no dung-heap in this garden, in which persons of quality like myself could lodge and feel themselves at home?"

But the frogs either did not or would not understand him. "I never ask a question twice," said the Beetle, after he had asked this one three times and got no answer. So he went on a little to where there lay a broken pot; it had no business to lie there, but being there it offered a shelter. Here lived several families of Earwigs, who do not require much accommodation, but like society. The ladies are richly endowed with motherly affection, so here the children of each were the prettiest and cleverest that could be.

"Our son has become engaged," said one mother, "the sweet innocent. His highest aim is to be able to creep one day into a clergyman's ear. He is so deliciously childlike, and his engagement will keep him from running wild; that is a great joy for a mother."

"Our son," said the second mother, "the moment he came out of the egg was at his tricks; he bubbles over with life, he'll run his feelers off. An immense joy for a mother; is it not so, Mr. Beetle?" She knew the visitor by his figure.

"You are both perfectly right," said the Beetle, whereupon he was invited to come indoors—so far as he could get under the broken pot.

"Now you shall see my little Earwig too," said a third and a fourth of the mothers. "They are darling children, and so droll! They are never naughty except when they've got a stomach-ache, but that is a thing one so easily gets at their age." So each of the mothers talked about her young ones, and the young ones talked too, and used the little pincers on their tails to tweak the Beetle's moustache.

"Little rascals, they're always after something," said the mothers, beaming with maternal affection. But it bored the Beetle, so he inquired if it was far from there to the dung-heap.

"Oh, that is right out in the world, on the other side of the ditch," said an Earwig. "So far, I do hope, none of my children will ever go. I should die of it."

"So far, however, I shall try to get," said the Beetle, and set off without taking leave: that is the most correct fashion.

At the ditch he met with several of his own race, all dung-beetles. "Here we live," they said, "and very cosy it is; may we venture to invite you down into the best mud? You must, I am sure, be tired with your journey."

"Indeed I am," said the Beetle. "I have had to lie upon linen in the rain, and cleanliness is very bad for me. I have besides got gout in my wing-joint from standing in a draught under a broken pot. It is really refreshing to get to one's own people at last."

"You come, I presume, from the dung-heap?" the eldest Beetle asked.

"From a more elevated station," said the Beetle. "I come from the Emperor's stable where I was born, shod with gold. I am travelling on a secret mission, about which you must ask me no questions, for I shall not answer them." With this the Beetle climbed down into the rich mud. There sat three young lady beetles, who giggled, for they did not know what to say.

"They are not engaged," said their mother, and they giggled again—this time from embarrassment.

"None fairer have I ever seen in the Emperor's stable," said the travelling Beetle.

"Do not trifle with my daughters. Do not speak to them unless your intentions are serious—but that they are, I am sure, and I give you my blessing."

"Hurrah!" cried all the others, and the Beetle was betrothed: betrothal first, then wedding, there was no reason to delay. The next day passed very happily, the following one was got over somehow; but on the third the Beetle had to think about providing food for a wife, and perhaps little ones.

"I have allowed myself to be taken in," he said. "I must just take them in in return." And so he did. He was gone, gone all day, gone all night, and his wife was left a widow. The other beetles said it was a rank adventurer whom they had adopted into the family. Now there was his wife on their hands. "Well," said her mother, "she can take her place as a girl again, take her place as my child. Shame on the loathsome wretch who has abandoned her!"

He meanwhile was on a voyage; he had set sail on a cabbage leaf to cross the ditch. Later in the morning two people came by, saw the Beetle, picked him up, turned him over and over, and both—especially one of them, a boy—were very learned about him. "Allah sees the black Beetle in the black stone in the black rock. Isn't there something like that in the Koran?" he asked, and went on to translate the Beetle's name into Latin and discourse about its species and habits. The elder scholar objected to taking the Beetle home, for, said he, "they had every bit as good specimens". And this, the Beetle thought, was by no means a polite remark, so he flew out of his hand, flew for some distance, for his wings were now dried, and eventually came to the hot-house, where he could with the greatest ease, a window being open, slip in and bury himself in the fresh manure. "This", he said, "is luxury."

He very soon fell asleep, and dreamt that the Emperor's horse had fallen down dead, and that Lord Beetle had received its golden shoes and the promise of two more. This was gratifying, and when the Beetle woke up, he crawled out and looked about him. What splendour was here in the hot-house! Great fan-leaved palms spread out above; the sun made them transparent, and beneath them grew a profusion of green, and flowers shone there, red as fire, yellow as amber, white as new fallen snow.

"What matchless splendour of vegetation," said the Beetle. "How nice it will taste when it goes rotten! This is a capital larder: some of my family are sure to be living here. I will go and explore and see if I can find some suitable company. I *am* proud, and I am proud to be so." So on he went, thinking about his dream and the golden shoes he had won.

Suddenly a hand grasped the Beetle: he was squeezed and tumbled about.

The gardener's little boy and a friend were in the hot-house, had caught sight of the Beetle, and meant to have some fun with him. Wrapped in a vine-leaf, he was thrust down into a hot trouser-pocket. He scrabbled and scrambled, but only got a squeeze from the boy's hand, who was running to the big lake at the end of the garden. Here the Beetle was first put into an old broken wooden shoe that had lost its instep. A peg was stuck in for a mast, and to this the Beetle was tethered with a bit of worsted. So now he was a skipper, and must put out to sea.

It was a very large lake; the Beetle thought it must be an ocean, and was so bewildered that he tumbled over on his back, and waved his legs in the air. The wooden shoe sailed along, for there was a current in the water; but as soon as the vessel got a little too far out, one of the boys turned up his trousers, waded out and brought it back. However, when it began drifting a second time someone called the boys, and sharply too, and they hurried off and left the wooden shoe to its fate. It drifted further and further out from land—steadily onward. It was appalling for the Beetle; he couldn't fly, he was bound fast to the mast.

He now received a visit from a fly.

"Beautiful weather we're having," said the fly. "I can rest here, and sun myself. Very pleasant situation, this, of yours."

"A lot of sense you've got, talking like that. Don't you see I'm tethered up?"

"Well, I'm not," said the fly, and off he went.

"Now I know the world," said the Beetle, "and it's a despicable world. I am the only honourable being in it. First of all, they refuse me gold shoes, next I have to lie out on wet linen, and stand in a draught, and after that they foist a wife on me. I make a bold dash into the world, to see how people are circumstanced, and how I ought to be, and then comes a human whelp, tethers me up, and sets me sailing on the roaring ocean. Meanwhile the Emperor's horse goes about in gold shoes; that's what rankles with me most. But it's no good looking for sympathy in this world. My life-history is interesting

in the highest degree; but what's the use of that if nobody knows it? Nor does the world deserve to know it, or it would have given me gold shoes in the Emperor's stable when his horse stuck out its legs and was shod. If I'd had the gold shoes, I should have been a credit to the stable. As it is, the stable has lost me, and the world has lost me, and it's all over."

But all wasn't over yet; a boat with some young girls in it came along.

"There's a wooden shoe sailing about," said one.

"There's a little creature tethered up in it," said the second. They came quite close to the wooden shoe and picked it up, and one of the girls took out a little pair of scissors and clipped the worsted without hurting the Beetle, and when they got to land, she put him down on the grass.

"Crawl off, crawl off! Fly away, fly away, if you can!" she said. "Freedom's a blessing."

And the Beetle flew straight in at the window of a large building, and sank down, tired out, upon the long soft silky mane of the Emperor's own horse, as it stood in its stall—the home of it and of the Beetle. He clung to the mane and sat there for a little and composed himself. "Here am I sitting on the Emperor's own horse—sitting like its rider. Now what's that I was saying? To be sure, now it comes back to me. A good notion, and a sound one—why did the horse have golden shoes given it? That's what the smith asked me, too. Now I've got the rights of it. It was on my account that the horse got gold shoes." And thereupon the Beetle was put in a good humour. "Travelling does clear one's ideas," he said.

The sun shone in upon him very pleasantly. "The world isn't such a bad place after all," said the Beetle, "if only you know how to take it."

So the world was beautiful because the Emperor's horse had been given gold shoes in order that the Beetle might ride on it.

"I shall now go down to the other Beetles and tell them how much has been done for me. I shall tell them of all the comforts I have enjoyed on my foreign tour, and I shall say that I now propose to remain at home until the horse has worn out his gold shoes."

[End of *The Beetle* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]