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The Happy Family

by

Hans Christian Andersen

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

The biggest green leaf we have in this country is certainly the burdock leaf. If you hold it in front of your little stomach it makes a regular apron, and if you put it on your head in rainy weather it is as good as an umbrella, it's so monstrous big. No dock ever grows single—no, where one grows, more grow. They make a beautiful show, and all that beauty is food for snails. The big white snails (which gentlefolk used in old times to have made into a fricassee, and they ate it and said, "Ha! How good that is"; for they thought it tasted delicious), they lived on the burdock leaves, and for that reason the burdocks used to be sown.

Well, there was an old manor house where people no longer ate snails. The snails had died out, but the docks hadn't died out. They grew and grew, over all the paths and all the beds, so that you could no longer get the upper hand of them, and it was a regular forest of docks. Here and there stood an apple tree, or a plum; otherwise you would never have guessed it was a garden; everywhere it was burdocks, and among them lived the two last snails, who were very, very old. They didn't know themselves how old they were, but they could quite well remember that there had been many more of them, and that they came of a family from foreign lands, and that the whole forest had been planted for them and theirs. They had never been outside it, but they knew that there was something in the world besides it, which was called the manor house, and that there you were boiled and you turned black and then you were laid on a silver dish; but what happened after that nobody knew. For the rest, what it felt like to be boiled and put on a silver dish they couldn't imagine, but it was bound to be delightful, and was extremely distinguished. Neither the cockchafer, nor the toad, nor the earthworm, whom they questioned about it, could give them any information, for none of them had ever been boiled or put on a silver dish.

The old white snails were the most distinguished people in the world—that they knew. And the forest existed for them, and the manor house existed in order that they might be boiled and put on a silver dish.

Well, they lived a very solitary and happy life, and since they had no children they had adopted a small common snail whom they brought up as their own. But the little one would not grow, for he was a common snail. However, the old people, and especially the mother, thought she could see he was getting on, and she asked father, if he couldn't see it himself, to feel the little snail's shell; and he felt it and agreed that mother was right.

One day there was a heavy shower.

"Hark how it drum-rum-rums on the docks," said the father snail.

"There's drops coming, too," said the mother. "Look, they're trickling right down the stalk! You'll see, it will be wet here. I'm glad we have our good houses, and the little one has his, too. Really, more has been done for us than for all the rest of creation; anyone can see we are the gentry of the world. We have houses from our birth, and the dock forest has been planted for us. I should like to know how far it extends and what there is outside it."

"There's nothing outside it," said the father. "No one can be better off anywhere than here, and I have nothing to wish for."

"Well," said the mother, "I *should* like to go to the manor house and be boiled and put on a silver dish. That's what happened to all our ancestors, and you may be sure there's something special about it."

"The manor house has very probably fallen down," said father, "or else the dock forest has grown over it so that the people can't get out. There's no sort of hurry about it, but you are always so terribly impetuous, and the little one is beginning to take after you. Hasn't he taken only three days to crawl up that stalk? It makes me giddy to look up at him."

"You mustn't be hard on him," said mother; "he creeps very carefully. He's a great joy to us, and we old people have nothing else to live for. But now, have you thought about this: where we can get a wife for him? Don't you think that somewhere, deep in the forest, there must be someone of our family?"

"Black snails enough, I'm sure there are," said the old man. "Black snails without houses—but that's very poor work, and

they have silly notions—still, we could commission the ants; they run to and fro as if they'd got something to do, and surely they would know of a wife for our little snail."

"I know the fairest of all, for certain," said the ants; "but I'm afraid it won't do, for she's a Queen."

"That makes no difference," said the old man. "Has she a house?"

"She has a palace," said the ants; "the most splendid ant palace, with seven hundred passages."

"Much obliged," said the mother; "our son shan't go into an ant heap! If you don't know of anything better we will commission the white midges; they fly far and wide in rain and sunshine, and they know the dock forest inside and out."

"We've got a wife for him," said the midges. "A hundred man-steps from here, on a gooseberry bush, there sits a little snail with a house. She's quite alone and old enough to be married; it's hardly a hundred man-steps."

"Well, let her come to him," said the old couple; "he owns a dock forest, and she has but a bush."

So they fetched the little lady snail. It was eight days before she arrived, but that was just the prettiest thing about it; it was plain to be seen she was of the right sort.

The wedding took place accordingly. Six glow-worms supplied the lighting, as best they could. Otherwise the affair was very quiet, for the old snails could not bear carousing and merriment. But a beautiful speech was made by the mother snail (father couldn't speak, he was too much moved) and they bequeathed the young people the whole dock forest, and said, as they always had said, that it was the best thing in the world, and that if they lived uprightly and honestly, and multiplied, they and their children would some day go to the manor house and be boiled black and laid on a silver dish.

When the speech was finished the old people retired into their houses and came out no more. They slept. The young snail couple ruled the forest and had a numerous progeny, but were never boiled and never attained the silver dish. So they concluded that the manor house had fallen down and that all the people in the world had died out, and as nobody contradicted them, it must have been true.

And the rain beat on the dock leaves and played the drum for them, and the sun shone to colour the forest for them, and they were very happy, and the whole family was happy; and that's a fact.

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