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Thumbelina was written by Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), and was translated from the Danish by M. R. James (1862-1936) as part of his *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* (1930).

Title: Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories — Thumbelina

Date of first publication: 1930

Place and date of edition used as base for this ebook: London: Faber and Faber, 1953

Author: Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875)

Translator: M. R. James (1862-1936)

Date first posted: 4 November 2007

Date last updated: August 19, 2014

Faded Page ebook#20140851

This ebook was produced by: Mark Bear Akrigg

Thumbelina

by

Hans Christian Andersen

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

Once upon a time there was a woman who very much wanted to have a little tiny child, but didn't know where she could get one from; so she went to an old witch and said to her: "I do so want to have a little child; will you kindly tell me where I can get one?"

"Oh, we can manage that," said the witch, "there's a barleycorn for you! it isn't the kind that grows in the farmers' fields or that the chickens have to eat; just put it in a flower-pot, and you shall see what you shall see."

"Much obliged," said the woman, and gave the witch twelve pence, and went home and planted the barleycorn; and very soon a fine large flower came up which looked just like a tulip, but the petals were closed up tight as if it were still a bud.

"That's a charming flower," said the woman, and gave it a kiss on its pretty red and yellow petals. But just as she kissed it the flower gave a loud crack and opened. You could see it was a real tulip, only right in the middle of it, on the green stool that is there, sat a tiny little girl, as delicate and pretty as could be. She was only a thumb-joint long, so she was called Thumbelina. She was given a splendid lacquered walnut shell for a cradle, blue violet leaves for mattresses, and a rose-leaf for a counterpane. There she slept at night, but in the daytime she played about on the table, where the woman had put a plate, round which she put a whole wreath of flowers with their stalks in the water; and on the water floated a large tulip-leaf on which Thumbelina could sit and sail from one side of the plate to the other. She had two white horse-hairs to row with. It was really beautiful to see her; she could sing too—oh, so delicately and prettily as no one had ever heard.

One night, as she lay in her pretty bed, a horrid Toad came hopping in at the window, which had a broken pane. The Toad was ugly and big and wet, and hopped right down on to the table where Thumbelina lay asleep under her rose-leaf.

"That would make a lovely wife for my son," said the Toad; so she took hold of the walnut-shell where Thumbelina slept and hopped off with her through the window and down into the garden. Through it flowed a big broad stream, but just at the edge it was marshy and muddy, and there the Toad lived with her son. Ugh! he was ugly and horrid too, just like his mother. "Koäx, koäx, brekke-ke-kex," was all he could say when he saw the pretty little girl in the walnut-shell. "Don't talk so loud, you'll wake her," said the old Toad, "and she might run away from us now, for she's as light as a swansdown feather. We'll put her out in the river on one of the broad water-lily leaves. It'll be like an island for her, she's so little and light. She can run about there while we get the drawing-room under the mud ready for you two to make your home in."

There were a great many water-lilies growing out in the stream, with broad green leaves that looked as if they were floating on the water; and the leaf that was furthest out was also the biggest of all. To this leaf the old Toad swam out and put the walnut-shell with Thumbelina on it. The poor little wretch woke up very early in the morning, and when she saw where she was, she began to cry—oh, so bitterly!—for there was water all round the big leaf and she couldn't possibly get to land.

The old Toad stayed down in the mud and set about decorating her room with rushes and yellow water-lily buds, so as to make it nice and neat for her new daughter-in-law; and then she swam out with her ugly son to the leaf where Thumbelina stood; they were going to fetch her pretty bed and put it up in the bridal chamber before she came there herself. The old Toad curtsied low in the water before her and said: "I present my son to you. He is going to be your husband, and you will have a delightful life with him down in the mud."

"Koäx, koäx, brekke-ke-kex," was all the son could say.

So they took the beautiful little bed and swam off with it while Thumbelina sat all alone on the green leaf crying, for she didn't want to live with the horrid Toad or have her ugly son for a husband. The little fishes, swimming beneath in the water, had seen the Toad and heard what she said, so they put their heads up; they wanted to see the little girl. But as soon as they saw her, they thought her so pretty that it grieved them very much to think that she had to go down to the ugly Toad. No, that could never be. So they swarmed together down in the water, all round the green stalk that held the leaf she was on, and gnawed it through with their teeth; so the leaf went floating down the stream, and bore Thumbelina far, far away, where the Toad could not go. Thumbelina sailed past many places, and the little birds in the bushes saw her and sang, "What a pretty little maid!" The leaf floated further and further away with her, and thus it was that Thumbelina went on her travels.

A beautiful little white butterfly kept flying round her, and at last settled on the leaf, for it took a fancy to Thumbelina, and she was very happy, for now the Toad could not get at her, and everything was beautiful where she was sailing: the sun shone on the water and made it glitter like gold. She took her sash and tied one end of it to the butterfly, and the other end she fastened to the leaf, and it went along much faster with her, for of course she was standing on the leaf. Just then a large Cockchafer came flying by and caught sight of her, and in an instant he had grasped her slender body in his claws, and flew up into a tree with her. But the green leaf went floating downstream and the butterfly with it, for he was tied to the leaf and could not get loose.

Goodness! how frightened poor Thumbelina was when the Cockchafer flew up into the tree with her. But she was most of all grieved for the pretty white butterfly which she had tied to the leaf, for unless it got loose it would be starved to death. However, the Cockchafer cared nothing about that. He alighted with her on the largest green leaf on the tree, and gave her honey out of the flowers to eat, and told her she was very pretty, though she wasn't in the least like a Cockchafer. Later on all the other Cockchafers that lived in the tree came and paid calls. They looked at Thumbelina, and the young lady Cockchafers brushed their feelers and said: "Why, she's only got two legs! a wretched sight!" "She's got no feelers," they said. "She's quite thin in the waist. Dreadful! She looks just like a human being! How ugly she is!" said all the lady Cockchafers; yet Thumbelina was as pretty as could be, and so thought the Cockchafer who had carried her off; but when all the rest said she was horrid, he came to think so too at last, and wouldn't have anything to do with her, she could go wherever she chose. They flew down from the tree with her and put her on a daisy, and there she sat and cried because she was so ugly that the Cockchafers wouldn't keep her—and yet she was the prettiest thing you could imagine, and delicate and bright like the loveliest rose-leaf. All the summer through poor Thumbelina lived quite alone in the big wood. She plaited herself a bed of green stalks and hung it up under a large dock leaf so as to be out of the rain. She picked the honey out of the flowers and ate it, and she drank the dew which lay every morning on the leaves. There she spent the summer and the autumn; but then came winter, the long cold winter. All the birds that had sung so prettily to her, flew their way; the trees and flowers withered, and the big dock-leaf under which she had lived rolled up and turned to nothing but a yellow dry stalk, and she was terribly cold, for her clothes were in rags, and she herself was so little and delicate. Poor Thumbelina! She was like to be frozen to death! Then it began to snow, and every snowflake that fell on her was just as when anybody throws a whole shovelful on any of us—for we are big, and Thumbelina was only an inch high. So she wrapped herself up in a dead leaf, but there was no warmth in it, and she shivered with the cold.

Just outside the wood where she was now, lay a large cornfield, but the corn had long been off it, and only the bare dry stubble stuck out of the frozen ground. This was like a whole forest for her to get through, and oh! how she did shiver with cold! At last she came to a Fieldmouse's door, which was a little hole down among the stubble. There the Fieldmouse lived snug and happy, with a whole room full of corn, a lovely kitchen and dining-room. Poor Thumbelina went up to the door just like any little beggar girl, and asked for a little bit of barleycorn, for she hadn't had anything whatever to eat for two days. "Poor little thing," said the Fieldmouse, who was at heart a kind old fieldmouse, "you come into my warm room and have dinner with me." And as she had taken a liking to Thumbelina she said: "You can stay the winter with me and welcome, only you'll have to keep my room nice and clean and tell me stories, for I'm very fond of them." And Thumbelina did as the kind old Fieldmouse asked, and had a very pleasant time of it.

"We shall soon be having a visitor," said the Fieldmouse. "My neighbour calls on me every weekday; he's even better housed than I am; his rooms are big, and he goes about in such a beautiful black velvet coat! Ah, if only you could get him for a husband! You would be well set up. But he can't see. Mind and tell him the very prettiest stories you know!" But Thumbelina didn't care much about this—she didn't want to marry the neighbour, for he was a Mole. He came and paid a call in his black velvet coat. He was very well off and very learned, the Fieldmouse said: "His mansion was

more than twenty times the size of hers, and he was very well informed"; but he didn't like the sun and the pretty flowers, and abused them, for he had never seen them. Thumbelina had to sing, and she sang both "Cockchafer, Cockchafer fly away home" and also "The monk walked in the meadow", and the Mole fell in love with her for her pretty voice; but said nothing about it, for he was a very cautious man.

He had recently dug a big passage through the earth from his house to theirs, and gave the Fieldmouse and Thumbelina leave to walk there whenever they liked; but he begged them not to be frightened at the dead bird that lay in the passage—a whole bird with beak and feathers which had certainly been dead only a little time, at the beginning of the winter, and was now buried just where he had made his passage.

The Mole took a bit of touchwood in his mouth (for that shines like fire in the dark) and went in front and lighted them along through the long dark passage, and when they got to where the dead bird lay, the Mole pushed his broad back against the ceiling and lifted the earth so that there was a big hole which let in the light: in the middle of this floor lay a dead swallow with its pretty wings close against its sides and its legs and head down in among its feathers: the poor bird had certainly died of cold. Thumbelina was very sorry for it; she was fond of all the little birds that had sung and twittered so prettily to her all the summer long; but the Mole kicked it with his short leg and said: "He won't be squeaking any more! It must be wretched to be born a little bird! Thank God, none of my children will be like that. A bird has nothing but its twit, twit, and is bound to starve to death in winter."

"Yes, you may well say so as a reasonable man," said the Fieldmouse; "what has the bird to show for all its twit, twit, when winter comes? Why, it has to starve and freeze, and yet they're so proud about it!"

Thumbelina said nothing, but when the others turned their backs on the bird, she stooped down and parted the feathers that covered its head, and kissed its dead eyes. "Perhaps this was the one that sang to me so prettily in the summer," she thought; "what a lot of pleasure it gave me, the dear little bird."

The Mole now stopped up the hole through which the daylight shone in, and saw the ladies home. But that night Thumbelina couldn't sleep at all, so she got out of bed and plaited a nice large coverlet of hay, and carried it down and spread it about the dead bird, and then she laid some soft cotton wool she had found in the Fieldmouse's room, on the bird's sides, so that it might lie warmly on the cold ground. "Farewell, you pretty little bird," said she; "farewell, and thank you for your lovely singing in the summer, when all the trees were green and the sun shone so hot on us." She laid her head against the bird's heart, and got quite a fright all at once, for it seemed as if something was knocking inside! It was the bird's heart. The bird was not dead; it was only in a swoon, and now that it was warmed, it came to life again.

In autumn, you know, all the swallows fly away to the warm countries, but if there is one that lags behind it gets frozen so that it tumbles down quite dead and lies where it fell, and the cold snow covers it over.

Thumbelina really shivered, so frightened was she: for the bird was enormously big compared with her who was only an inch high: but she took courage and laid the cotton wool closer about the poor swallow, and folded a peppermint leaf, that she had for her own counterpane, and put it over the bird's head. Next night she stole down to it again, and this time it was quite alive, but so weak that it could only open its eyes for a second, and look at Thumbelina who stood there with a bit of touchwood in her hand, for other light she had none.

"Thank you, you pretty little child," the sick swallow said to her, "I've been beautifully warmed. Soon I shall get back my strength and be able to fly about again in the warm sun outside."

"Oh," said Thumbelina, "but it's dreadfully cold outside, snowing and freezing! You must stay in your warm bed, I'll nurse you, be sure!" Then she brought the swallow some water in the leaf of a plant, and it drank, and told her how it had hurt its wing on a thorn bush, and so couldn't fly as well as the other swallows when they set out to fly, far, far away to the warm countries. At last it had fallen to the ground, but it couldn't remember any more and didn't know in the least how it had got to where it was.

All the winter it stayed down there, and Thumbelina was very kind to it, and got very fond of it, but neither the Mole nor the Fieldmouse heard anything whatever about it; they disliked the poor wretched swallow.

As soon as spring came and the sun's warmth got into the ground, the swallow said good-bye to Thumbelina, who opened

the hole which the Mole had made above. The sun shone in delightfully, and the swallow asked if Thumbelina would not come with it: she could sit on its back and they would fly away into the greenwood. But Thumbelina knew that it would grieve the old Fieldmouse, if she left her like that. "No, I can't," said Thumbelina. "Good-bye, good-bye, you kind pretty maid," said the swallow, and flew out into the sunshine. Thumbelina stood looking after it, and the water stood in her eyes, for she was very fond of the poor swallow.

"Twit, twit," sang the bird, and flew off into the greenwood.

Thumbelina was very unhappy; she got no chance to go out into the warm sunshine, because the corn that had been sown in the field over the Fieldmouse's house was grown tall, and made a thick forest for the poor little maid, no more than an inch high.

"This summer you must make your trousseau," the Fieldmouse told her; for their neighbour, the tiresome Mole in the black velvet coat, had proposed to her. "You shall have both woollen and linen—something to sit in and to lie on when you are the Mole's wife." So Thumbelina had to spin on the distaff, and the Fieldmouse hired four spiders to spin and weave day and night. Every evening the Mole called in, and they always talked about how when summer was over the sun wouldn't be near as hot: just now it was scorching the ground as hard as a stone: ah yes, when the summer was over Thumbelina should be married. But she wasn't at all pleased; she didn't like the tiresome Mole one bit. Every morning when the sun rose and every evening when it set she stole out to the doorway, and there, when the wind parted the heads of corn, so that she could see the blue sky, she thought how bright and pretty it was outside, and longed to get another sight of the dear swallow: but he never came, he must certainly be flying far away in the beautiful greenwood. By the time autumn came, Thumbelina had all her trousseau ready.

"In four weeks' time you shall be married," the Fieldmouse told her, but Thumbelina cried and said she wouldn't marry the tiresome Mole. "Rubbish," said the Fieldmouse, "don't be pigheaded or I'll bite you with my white teeth. It's a splendid husband you're getting. The queen herself hasn't the like of his black velvet coat; and a full kitchen and cellar he has, too! Just you thank your Maker for him."

So the wedding was to be; already the Mole had come to fetch Thumbelina, and with him she must go deep down underground, and never come out into the warm sun, for he couldn't stand it. The poor child was bitterly grieved, for now she must bid farewell to the beautiful sunshine which she had at least had the chance of seeing from the Fieldmouse's door.

"Farewell! Farewell! bright sun," she said, stretching her arms upwards and stepping a little way outside the Fieldmouse's house, for now the corn was reaped, and only the dry stubble left. "Farewell! Farewell!" she said again, and threw her arms about a little red flower that grew there. "Give my love to the dear swallow for me if ever you see him."

Twit! Twit! sounded at that moment above her head. She looked up and there was the swallow just flying by. He was overjoyed when he caught sight of Thumbelina, and she told him how she hated to have the ugly Mole for a husband, and how she must live right down underground where the sun never shone. She couldn't help crying.

"Cold winter is coming," said the swallow. "I am going to fly far away to the warm countries, will you come with me? You can sit on my back, only tie yourself tight with your sash, and we'll fly far away from the ugly Mole and his dark home, far over the mountains to the warm countries where the sun shines fairer than here, and there is always summer and lovely flowers. Do fly away with me, you sweet little Thumbelina, who saved my life when I lay frozen in that dark cellar underground."

"Yes, I will come with you," said Thumbelina. So she got up on the bird's back, put her feet upon his outspread wings, tied her belt fast to one of his strongest feathers, and off flew the swallow high in the air over forest and lake, high above the great mountains where the snow always lies, and where Thumbelina might have frozen in the cold air but that she crept in among the bird's warm feathers, and only put her little head out to see all the beauty beneath her.

At last they got to the warm countries. There the sun shone far brighter than here, the sky seemed twice as high, and on hedges and ditches grew the loveliest clusters of grapes, green and purple. In the woods grew oranges and lemons, there

was a scent of myrtle and mint, and in the roads pretty children ran about and played with great gay butterflies. But the swallow flew still further, and the country grew more and more delightful. Under splendid trees, beside a blue lake, stood a shining palace of white marble, built in ancient days, with creepers twining about its tall pillars. At its top were a number of swallows' nests, one of which was the home of the swallow who was carrying Thumbelina.

"Here is my house," said the swallow, "but won't you look out for yourself one of the finest of the flowers that grow down below? and I'll put you there, and you shall find everything as happy as your heart can wish."

"That will be lovely," said she, and clapped her little hands.

A great white marble column lay there, which had fallen down and broken into three pieces: between them grew large beautiful white flowers. The swallow flew down with Thumbelina and set her on one of the broad leaves. But what a surprise for her! A little man was sitting in the middle of the flower, as white and transparent as if he were made of glass, with the prettiest gold crown on his head and the loveliest bright wings on his shoulders, and he was no bigger than Thumbelina. He was the angel of the flower. In each of them there lived such another little man or woman, but this one was the king of them all.

"Goodness, how beautiful he is," Thumbelina whispered to the swallow. The little prince was quite alarmed by the swallow, which was a giant bird to him, tiny and delicate as he was, but when he saw Thumbelina he was delighted, for she was by far the prettiest girl he had ever seen. He took his gold crown off his head and laid it upon hers, asked what her name was, and whether she would be his wife, for then she would become queen of all the flowers. Here indeed was a husband—very different from the Toad's son or the Mole with his black velvet coat. So she said "Yes" to the handsome prince; and out of every flower there came a lady or a lord, so pretty that it was a pleasure to see them. Everyone brought Thumbelina a present, but the best of all was a pair of beautiful wings taken from a big white fly. They were fastened to Thumbelina's back, and then she could fly from flower to flower. There were great rejoicings, and the swallow sat on his nest up there and sang to them as well as ever he could; but at heart he was sad, for he was very fond of Thumbelina and would have liked never to be parted from her. "You shan't be called Thumbelina," the angel of the flower said to her; "it's an ugly name, and you are very pretty; we will call you Maia."

"Good-bye, good-bye," said the swallow, when he flew back, away from the warm countries; far, far, back to Denmark. There he had a little nest above the window, where the man who can tell stories lives; and to him he sang, "Twit, twit", and that's the way we came by the whole story.

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