

The Beetle

Hans Christian Andersen

The Emperor's horse was shod with gold - a golden shoe on each of its feet.

And why was he getting golden shoes?

He was a magnificent-looking animal, with slender legs, intelligent eyes, and a mane that hung down his neck like a soft veil of silk. He had carried his master through the smoke and flame of battle and heard the bullets sing and whistle around him; he had kicked and bitten those about him and done his share of the fighting whenever the enemy advanced; he had leaped, carrying his master on his back, over the enemy's fallen horse and had saved the Emperor's red gold crown, saved the life of the Emperor, which was much more valuable than the red gold; and that's why the Emperor's horse had golden shoes, a golden shoe on each of his feet.

And the Beetle came creeping out.

"First the big ones," he said, "and then the little ones; but size isn't the only thing that does it." Then he stretched out his thin legs.

"And what do you want?" demanded the Blacksmith.

"Golden shoes," replied the Beetle.

"Why, you must be crazy!" said the Blacksmith. "Do you want golden shoes, too?"

"Golden shoes," said the Beetle. "I'm just as good as that great creature that is waited on, currycombed, and brushed, and served with food and drink. Don't I belong to the imperial stable, too?"

"But *why* does the horse have golden shoes?" asked the Blacksmith. "Don't you understand that?"

"Understand? I understand that it is a personal insult to me," said the Beetle. "It's just done to annoy me, so I'm going out into the world."

"Get out of here!" said the Blacksmith.

"What a rude person!" said the Beetle as he left the stable. He flew a little way and presently found himself in a beautiful flower garden, all fragrant with roses and lavender.

"Isn't it lovely here?" asked one of the little Ladybirds that were flying about, with black spots on their red shieldlike wings. "How sweet it smells here and how beautiful it is!"

"I'm used to much better things," said the Beetle. "Do you call *this* beautiful? Why, there isn't so much as a manure pile here!"

Then he went on and got into the shadow of a large Gillyflower. A Caterpillar was crawling along on it.

"How beautiful the world is!" said the Caterpillar. "The sun is so warm, and everything is so pleasant! And when my time comes and I must die, as people call it, I'll wake up again, and I'll be a butterfly!"

"What conceit!" said the Beetle. "*You* fly about like a butterfly, indeed! I'm from the stable of the Emperor, and no one there, not even the Emperor's favorite horse - who wears my castoff golden shoes - has any idea like that! Get wings! Fly! Why, I can fly already!" and then the Beetle flew away. "I don't really want to be annoyed, and yet I am annoyed."

Soon afterward he settled on a large lawn. Here he lay quietly for a while, and then he fell asleep.

My goodness! The rain came down in buckets! The noise woke up the Beetle, and he

wanted to get down into the earth at once, but he couldn't. He tumbled over; sometimes he was swimming on his stomach, sometimes on his back, and it was out of the question to try to fly; would he ever escape from there with his life? So he just lay where he was and remained lying there.

When the rain had let up a little, and the Beetle had blinked the water from his eyes, he saw something gleaming white. It was linen that had been put out there to bleach; he managed to make his way to it and creep into a fold of the damp cloth. Certainly this place wasn't as comfortable as the warm stable, but there was nothing better, and so he stayed there for a whole day and a whole night, while the rain stayed, too. The next morning he crept out, very much annoyed with the weather.

Two frogs were sitting on the linen, their bright eyes shining with pleasure.

"What wonderful weather this is!" one of them said. "How refreshing! And this linen holds the water together so perfectly! My hind legs are tickling as if I were going to swim."

"I'd like to know," said the other Frog, "whether the swallow, who flies so far in her many trips to foreign countries, ever finds a better climate than ours. Such a storm, and such a downpour! You really might think you were lying in a wet ditch. Anybody that doesn't enjoy this weather certainly doesn't love his native country!"

"Have you ever been in the Emperor's stable?" asked the Beetle. "The dampness there is both warm and refreshing. That's what I am used to; that's the climate for me; but one can't take it along on a journey. Isn't there a nice hotbed here in the garden, where persons of rank, like me, can find a place to live and make himself at home?"

But the Frogs either didn't or wouldn't understand him.

"I never ask a question twice," said the Beetle, after he had already asked three times without getting any answer.

He went on a little farther and bumped against a piece of broken pottery. It certainly shouldn't have been lying there, but since it was it gave good shelter. Several families of Earwigs lived here, and they didn't need very much room; but they liked company. The females were full of the most devoted mother love, and so each one considered her own child the most beautiful and clever of all.

"Our son has become engaged!" said one mother. "The sweet, innocent baby! His greatest ambition is to creep someday into a clergyman's ear! He's such a lovely boy. And being engaged will keep him out of mischief. What joy for a mother!"

"Our son," said another mother, "had hardly crept from the egg before he got into mischief. He's so full of life and spirits he'll run his horns off! What joy that is for a mother! Isn't that true, Mr. Beetle?" for she had recognized the stranger by his shape.

"You're both quite right," said the Beetle; so they invited him to walk in - that is, to come as far as he could under the broken flowerpot.

"Now you ought to see *my* little earwig!" observed a third mother, and a fourth. "They're such lovely children, and so amusing! They never behave badly, except when they have a stomach-ache, but that happens pretty often at their age."

Then each mother spoke of her own youngster, and the youngsters joined in the conversation, and used the little forks in their tails to pull the Beetle's mustache.

"The little scamps, they're always up to something!" said the mothers, beaming with maternal love. But the Beetle was bored by all this, and so he asked how far it was to the nearest hotbed.

"Oh, that's way out in the world, on the other side of the ditch," said an Earwig. "I hope none of my children ever goes that far - it would be the death of me."

"Just the same I'll try to go that far," said the Beetle, and then he went off without taking any formal leave, for that's considered the politest thing to do. And by the ditch he met several of his kind - all Beetles.

"We live here," they said. "And we're very cozy here, too. May we invite you to step down into this rich soil? The journey must have tired you out."

"Indeed it has," said the Beetle. "I've been lying on linen out in the rain, and cleanliness tires me very much. I also have rheumatism in my wing joints, from standing in a draft under a broken flowerpot. It's really very relaxing to be among one's own kind again."

"Perhaps you come from the hotbed?" asked the oldest of them.

"Oh, I come from a much higher place," said the Beetle. "I come from the Emperor's stable, where I was born with golden shoes on! I'm traveling on a secret mission. You mustn't ask me any questions, for I won't tell you anything."

And so the Beetle stepped down into the rich soil. There sat three young lady Beetles, and they tittered because they didn't know what to say.

"They are not engaged yet," said their mother, and then the young lady Beetles tittered again, this time from embarrassment.

"I have never seen greater beauties even in the Emperor's stables!" said the traveling Beetle.

"Now don't you spoil my daughters," said the mother, "and please don't speak to them unless you have serious intentions. But of course your intentions are honorable, and so I give you my blessing!"

"Hurrah!" cried all the other Beetles at once, and so the Beetle was engaged. First the engagement, then the wedding; there was nothing to wait for.

The following day passed pleasantly, and the next was fair enough, but by the third day it was time to think of food for the wife and perhaps for children.

"I've let them put something over on me," he said, "and now the only thing to do is put something over on them in return."

And that he did. Away he went, away all day, and away all night, while his wife was left a widow.

The other Beetles said that they had taken nothing more than a complete tramp into the family and now his wife was left a burden on their hands.

"Well, then, she shall be unmarried again," said her mother, "and sit here among my unmarried daughters. Shame on that disgusting rascal who deserted her!"

Meanwhile the Beetle had been traveling on, and had sailed across the ditch on a cabbage leaf. That morning two persons came by, and when they saw the Beetle they picked him up, turned him over and over, and both looked very learned - especially one of them, a boy.

"Allah sees the black beetle in the black stone and in the black mountain," he said. "Isn't that in the Koran?" Then he translated the Beetle's name into Latin and discoursed upon its nature and family history. The older scholar was opposed to carrying him home, saying they had just as good a specimen there. This, the Beetle thought, was a very rude thing to say, consequently he suddenly flew out of the speaker's hand. As his wings were dry now, he flew a considerable distance and reached a greenhouse, where he found a sash of the glass roof partly open, so, with the greatest of ease, he slipped in and buried himself in the manure.

"It's very comfortable here," he remarked.

Soon he felt asleep and dreamed that the Emperor's horse had fallen down and that Mr. Beetle had been given its golden shoes, with the promise that he should have two more.

It was all very charming. And when the Beetle woke up he crept out and looked around him. What splendor there was in the greenhouse! Great palm trees were growing high, and the sun made them look transparent. And beneath them what a riot of green, and blooming flowers, red as fire, yellow as amber, or white as freshly fallen snow!

"What magnificent plants! How delicious they'll taste when they're nice and decayed!" said the Beetle. "This is a splendid larder! I am sure some of my relatives live here; I'll just see if I can find anyone fit to associate with. I'm proud, and I'm proud of being that way."

So he thought of the dream he had had about the dying horse and the golden shoes he had won. But suddenly a hand seized the Beetle and squeezed him and turned him over and over.

The gardener's little son and his playmate had come to the greenhouse and, seeing the Beetle, had decided to have some fun with him. First he was wrapped in a vine leaf and then shoved down into a warm trousers pocket. He squirmed and wriggled, but he got a good squeezing from the boy's hand. The boy went rapidly toward the great lake at the bottom of the garden. Here they put the Beetle in an old broken wooden shoe, with the top part missing. A little stick was placed upright for a mast, and to this the Beetle was bound with a woolen thread. Now he was a skipper and had to sail away.

The lake was very large, and to the Beetle it seemed a vast ocean; he was so amazed at its size that he fell over on his back and kicked out with all his legs.

The wooden shoe sailed away. The current bore it along, but whenever it went too far from shore one of the boys would roll up his trousers, go in after it, and bring it back. However, just as it sailed merrily out to sea again, the boys were called away, and quite sharply, too, so that they ran away from the lake, leaving the wooden shoe to its fate. It drifted away from the shore, farther and farther out; it was a terrible situation for the Beetle; he couldn't fly, for he was bound tightly to the mast.

Then a Fly paid him a visit.

"What beautiful weather we're having!" said the Fly. "I'll rest here; I can take a sun bath here. You're certainly having a nice time of it!"

"You don't know what you're talking about," replied the Beetle. "Can't you see I'm tied up?"

"I'm not a prisoner," said the Fly, and promptly flew away.

"Well, now I guess I know the world," the Beetle said. "And it's a mean place. I'm the only honest person in it. First, they won't give me my golden shoes, then I have to lie on wet linen and stand in a draft, and as a climax they hitch a wife to me. Then, when I made a quick move out into the world, and found out how people live, and how I ought to live, one of these human puppies comes and ties me up and leaves me to the mercy of the wild ocean, while the Emperor's horse prances about proudly in golden shoes. That's what annoys me more than anything else! But you mustn't expect sympathy in this world! My career has been very interesting, but what's the good of that, if nobody knows about it? The world doesn't deserve to know about it, for it should have given me golden shoes when the Emperor's horse was shod and I stretched out my feet to be shod, too. If they'd given me golden shoes I'd have been an honor to the stable. Now the stable has lost me, and the world has lost me! It's all over!"

But it wasn't all over yet. Some young girls came rowing up in a boat.

"There's an old wooden shoe sailing along over there!" said one of them.

"And there's a little animal tied fast in it!" said another.

Their boat came quite close to the wooden shoe, and they fished him out of the water. One of the girls took out a tiny pair of scissors and cut the woolen thread without hurting the Beetle; and when she stepped on shore she placed him down on the grass.

"Crawl, crawl, fly, fly away if you can!" she said. "Freedom is a precious thing!"

And the Beetle flew straight through the open window of a large building, and there he sank down, tired and exhausted, in the long, fine, soft mane of the Emperor's favorite horse, which was standing in the stable where he and the Beetle lived. He clung fast to the mane and sat there a little while until he had collected himself.

"Here I am sitting on the Emperor's favorite horse! Yes, sitting on him as his rider! But what am I saying? Oh, yes, now it's clear to me; yes, it's a good idea and quite right. Why did the horse get golden shoes, the blacksmith asked me. Now I know the answer. They were given to the horse on *my* account!"

That put the Beetle in good spirits again.

"Traveling broadens the mind," he said.

The sun's rays streamed in on him and shone very brightly.

"On the whole, the world isn't so bad, after all!" said the Beetle. "But you must know how to take it!"

The world was wonderful, because the Emperor's favorite horse had golden shoes and because the Beetle was its rider.

"Now I am going down to the other beetles and tell them about all the pleasures I have enjoyed on my trip abroad, and I am going to say that now I'm going to stay at home until the horse has worn out his golden shoes."