

The Toad

Hans Christian Andersen

The well was deep, and therefore the rope was long; the wheel went around with difficulty when the waterfilled bucket had to be pulled up over the side of the well. The sun could never mirror itself down in the water, no matter how brightly it shone; but as far down as its rays penetrated, green weeds were growing from between the stones.

There was a family of toads living down there. It was an immigrant family which, as a matter of fact, had come down there headlong in the person of the old toad mother, who was still living. The green frogs that swam in the water had made their homes there for a much longer time, but they acknowledged their cousins and called them "well guests." The latter, however, had no thoughts of ever leaving, they found it very comfortable here on the dry land, as they called the wet stones.

Mamma Frog had once traveled; she'd been in the bucket when it had gone up, but the light above had been too strong for her and given her a frightful pain in the eyes. Luckily she had managed to get out of the bucket. She'd fallen into the water with a tremendous splash and been laid up for three days with a backache. She didn't have much to tell about the world above, but she did know, and so did all the others, that the well wasn't the whole world. Mamma Toad, on the other hand, might have told them a few things about it, but she never answered when anyone inquired, so they stopped inquiring.

"Big and ugly, fat and loathsome, she is!" said the young green frogs. "And her brats are getting to be just like her!"

"Maybe so," said Mamma Toad, "but one of them has a jewel in its head, if I don't have it myself!"

And the green frogs listened and stared at her, and as they didn't like this news, they made faces at her and dived down to the bottom. But the young toads stretched out their hind legs proudly. Each of them thought it was the one which had the jewel, so they all kept their heads quite rigid, but at last they began to ask what it was they had to be proud of and just what a jewel was, anyway.

"It's something so glorious and precious," said Mamma Toad, "that I can't describe it. It's something you wear for your own pleasure and others become irritated over. But ask no more, for I won't answer."

"Well, I haven't got the jewel," said the smallest Toad, which was as ugly as it could be. "Why should I have anything so splendid? And if it irritates others, why, it wouldn't please me. No, all I want is to get up to the top of the well sometime and take one peep out! It must be wonderful up there!"

"Better stay where you are," said the old Toad. "You're at home here, and you know what it's like. Keep away from the bucket, or it may squash you! And even if you did get safely into it you might fall out. Not everyone can come down as luckily as I did and keep limbs and eggs all safe and sound."

"Croak!" said the little one; and that was the same as when we humans say, "Oh!"

It had such a great desire to get up to the top of the well and look out; it felt an intense longing for the green things up there. And next morning, when the bucket, filled with water, was being pulled up and happened to pause for an instant beside the stone where the Toad sat, the little creature quivered through and through and then jumped into the bucket. It sank to the bottom of the water, which soon was drawn up and emptied out.

"Phooie, what a nuisance!" said the man when he saw it. "That's the ugliest thing I've ever

seen!" And then he kicked with his heavy wooden shoe at the Toad, which came close to being crippled, but managed to escape into the middle of some tall nettles. It saw stalk after stalk around it; it looked upward and saw the sun shining on the leaves, making them quite transparent.

For the Toad it was the same as it is for us when we come suddenly into a great forest, where the sun shines between leaves and branches.

"It's much prettier here than down in that well! You could stay here for your whole lifetime!" said the little Toad. It lay there for an hour; it lay there for two hours. "Now what could there be outside? Since I've come this far I might as well go farther." So it crept as fast as it could, until it came out into the road, where the sun shone on it; and then it was powdered with dust as it hopped across the road.

"Here one is really on dry land," said the Toad. "I'm getting almost too much of a good thing; it tickles right through me!"

Now it reached a ditch, where grew forget-me-nots and meadowsweet, while beyond it was a hedge of white thorn and elderbushes, with convolvulus creeping and hanging about it. What vivid colors there were to see here! And here flew a butterfly, too. The Toad thought it was a flower that had torn itself loose in order to get a better look at the world; that, of course, was very reasonable.

"If I could only move about like that!" said the Toad. "Croak! Oh! How glorious!"

For eight days and nights it remained by the ditch and felt no want of food. Then on the ninth day it thought, "Oh, forward." But was there anything more beautiful to be found anywhere? Perhaps a little toad or some green frogs; there had been a sound in the wind the night before which had seemed to indicate there were cousins in the neighborhood.

"It's wonderful to be alive! To come up out of that well and lie in the bed of nettles, to creep along and hop across the dusty road and rest in the wet ditch! But on, further forward! I must find frogs or a little toad; one can't do without companions, after all. Nature alone isn't enough for one!" And so it started its wanderings again.

In a field, it came to a large pond with rushes around it, and it went exploring in there.

"It's too wet for you in here, isn't it?" said the frog inside. "But you're quite welcome. Are you a he or a she? Not that it matters; you're equally welcome in either case."

And so it was invited to a concert that evening, a family concert, with a lot of gaiety and feeble voices; we all know that sort of affair. There were no refreshments, except free drinks - the whole pond, if they could drink it.

"Now I'll be traveling on," said the little Toad, which was always craving for something better.

It saw the stars twinkling, so large and so clear; it saw the new moon shine, and it saw the sun rise higher and higher.

"I think I'm still in a well, but a bigger well. I must get higher up! I feel a restlessness, a longing!" And when the moon was full and round, the poor creature thought, "I wonder if that is the bucket that's let down, and which I must hop into if I want to get higher? Or is the sun the big bucket? How large that is, and how bright! Why, it could hold all of us at once! I must watch for my chance! What a brightness there is in my head! I don't believe the jewel could shine more brightly. But I don't have the jewel, and I shall not cry for it. No; still higher in brightness and happiness! I feel confidence and yet fear. It's a hard step to take, but I must take it. On, further forward! Right on down the road!"

Then it moved along in leaps, as indeed such a creature can, until it reached the highway where humans lived. Here were both flower gardens and vegetable gardens. It stopped to

rest by a cabbage garden.

"How many different beings there are that I've never known of! And how great and blessed the world is! But you must keep looking about you, instead of always sitting in the same place." And so it hopped into the cabbage garden. "How green it is here! How pretty it is here!"

"That I well know," said the Caterpillar on a cabbage leaf. "My leaf is the largest one here; it covers half the world, and the rest of the world I can do without!"

"Cluck! Cluck!" said somebody, and hens came hopping into the garden.

The first Hen was farsighted; she spied the worm on the curly leaf and pecked at it so that it fell to the ground, where it lay twisting and turning. The Hen looked at it first with one eye and then with the other, for she couldn't figure out what would become of that wriggling.

"It isn't doing that of its own accord," thought the Hen, and she raised her head to strike again. Whereupon the Toad became so frightened that it bumped right into the Hen.

"So that thing has auxiliary troops to fight for it!" she said. "Just look at that vermin!" Then the Hen turned away. "I don't care about that little green mouthful; it would only tickle my throat!" The other hens agreed with her, and so away they went.

"I got away from her with my wriggling," said the Caterpillar. "It's good to keep your presence of mind, but the hardest job is ahead - to get back up onto my cabbage leaf. Where is it?"

Then the little Toad came forward to sympathize. It was happy that its own ugliness had frightened away the Hen.

"What makes you think that?" asked the Caterpillar. "I wriggled away from her myself. You're indeed very unpleasant to look at! Let me get back to my own place. Now I can smell cabbage; I'm near my own leaf! There's nothing so beautiful as one's own. But I must get up higher."

"Yes, higher!" said the little Toad. "Higher up! It feels just as I do, but it isn't in a good humor today, because of its fright. We all want to get up higher!" And it looked up as high as it could.

A stork sat in his nest on the roof of the farmhouse; he clattered and the stork mother clattered.

"How high up they live!" thought the Toad. "If only I could get up there!"

In the farmhouse lived two young students; one was a poet, the other a naturalist. The one sang and wrote with gladness of all that God had created, as it was mirrored in his heart; he sang of it in short, clear, and rich, imposing verses. The other took hold of the creation itself, yes, and took it apart when it needed analyzing. He treated our Lord's work like a great piece of arithmetic; subtracted, multiplied, wanted to know it outside and inside, and to talk of it with intelligence, with complete understanding; and yet he talked of it with gladness and with wisdom. They were good, happy people, both of them.

"Why, there is a good specimen of a toad," said the Naturalist. "I must have it to preserve in alcohol!"

"You have two already," said the Poet. "Let it stay there in peace and enjoy itself."

"But it's so beautifully ugly!" said the other.

"If we could find the jewel in its head," said the Poet, "then I myself would give you a hand at splitting it open."

"The jewel!" said the other. "How well you know your natural history!"

"But isn't there something very splendid about the old folk legend that the toad, the ugliest of creatures, often has hidden in its head the most precious of jewels? Isn't it much the same with people? Wasn't there a jewel like that hidden in Aesop, and Socrates, too?"

The Toad didn't hear any more, and hadn't understood half of what it had heard. The two friends went on, and it escaped being preserved in alcohol.

"They were talking about that jewel, too," said the Toad. "It's good that I don't have it; otherwise I would have got into trouble."

Then there was a clattering on the farmer's roof. Father Stork was giving a lecture to his family, and they were all looking down askance at the two young men in the cabbage garden.

"A human being is the most conceited of creatures," said the Stork.

"Hear how they go on jabbering, and yet they can't even make as much noise as a rattle! They crow over their eloquence, their language! A fine language that is! It becomes more unintelligible even to them with each day's journey. We can speak our language the whole world over, in Denmark or in Egypt. As for flying, they can't do that at all. They crawl along by means of an invention they call a railway, but there they often get their necks broken. I get the shivers in my bill when I think of it! The world can exist without people. We could well do without them. May we only have frogs and earthworms!"

"My, that was a powerful speech!" thought the little Toad. "What a great man he is, and how high he sits up there! I never saw anyone that high before. And how well he can swim!" it exclaimed, for just then the Stork soared off into the air on outstretched wings.

And then Mother Stork talked in the nest. She told about the land of Egypt and the water of the Nile, and of all the wonderful mud there was to be found in foreign countries; it sounded entirely new and charming to the little Toad.

"I must get to Egypt!" it said. "If only the Stork would take me along, or if one of its youngsters would. I would do the little one some favor in turn, on his wedding day. Yes, I'll get to Egypt, because I'm lucky! All the longing and yearning I feel is surely better than having a jewel in one's head."

And still it had the true jewel! That eternal longing and desire to go upward, ever upward, was the jewel, and it shone within the little Toad, shone with gladness, shone brightly.

At that very moment the Stork came. He had seen the Toad in the grass, and now he swooped down and, not very gently, seized the little creature. His bill pinched, and the wind whistled; this was anything but comfortable. But still the Toad was going upward, and off to Egypt, it knew; therefore its eyes brightened until it seemed as if a spark shot out from them.

"Croak! Oh!"

The body was dead; the little Toad had been killed. But the spark from its eyes - what became of that?

The sunbeam caught it up and bore away the jewel from the head of the Toad. Where?

You should not ask the Naturalist; rather ask the Poet. He'll tell it to you as a fairy tale; and the Caterpillar will be in it, and the Stork family will have a part in it. Just think - the Caterpillar will be changed into a beautiful butterfly. The Stork family will fly over mountains and seas to faraway Africa and yet find the shortest way home again to the land of Denmark, to the same village, to the same roof! Yes, it's all almost too much like a fairy tale, and still it is true! You may well ask the Naturalist about *that*; he'll have to admit it; and yet you know it yourself, for you've witnessed it.

But the jewel in the head of the Toad? Look for it in the sun; look *at* it if you can.

The brightness is too great. We have not yet eyes that can look directly at all the glories God has created, but someday we shall have them, and that will be the most beautiful fairy tale of all, for we ourselves shall have a part in it.