

The Little Green Ones

Hans Christian Andersen

A rose tree drooped in the window. Not so long ago it was green and blooming, but now it looked sickly - something was wrong with it. A regiment of invaders were eating it up; and, by the way, it was a very decent and respectable regiment, dressed in green uniforms. I spoke to one of the invaders; he was only three days old but already a grandfather. Do you know what he said? Well, what he said is all true - he spoke of himself and the rest of the invaders. Listen!

"We're the strangest regiment of creatures in the world! Our young ones are born in the summertime, for the weather is pleasant then. We're engaged and have the wedding at once. When it gets cold we lay our eggs, and the little ones are snug and warm. The ant, that wisest of creatures (we have a great deal of respect for him!), studies us and appreciates us. He doesn't eat us up all at once; instead, he takes our eggs and lays them out on the ground floor of his and his family's anthill - stores layer after layer of them, all labeled and numbered, side by side, so that every day a new one may creep out of the egg. Then he keeps us in a stable, pinches our hind legs, and milks us, and then we die. It is really a great pleasure. The ants have the prettiest name for us - 'little milch cow!'

"All creatures who have the common sense that the ant has call us that; it's only humans who don't, and that is an insult great enough to embitter all our lives. Couldn't you write us a protest against it? Couldn't you put those people in their right place? They look at us so stupidly, look at us with jealous eyes, just because we eat rose leaves, while they eat everything that's created, everything that is green or grows. Oh, they give us the most despicable, the most distasteful name: I won't even repeat it! Ugh! It turns my stomach; no, I won't repeat it - at least not when I'm wearing my uniform, and I am always wearing my uniform!

"I was born on a rose leaf. My whole regiment and I live off the rose tree; but then it lives again in us, who are of a higher order of beings. Humans detest us! They come and kill us with soapsuds - that's a horrible drink! I seem to smell it even now; it's dreadful to be washed when you're born not to be washed. Man, you who look at us with your stupid soapsud eyes, consider what our place in nature is; consider our artistic way of laying eggs and breeding children! We have been blessed to accomplish and multiply! We are born on the roses and we die in the roses - our whole life is a lovely poem. Don't call us by that name which you yourself think most despicable and ugly - the name I can't bear to speak or to repeat! Instead, call us the ants' milch cows, the rose-tree regiment, the little green ones!"

And I, the man, stood looking at the tree and at the little green ones - whose name I'll not mention, for I shouldn't like to hurt the feelings of a citizen of the rose tree, a large family with eggs and youngsters. And the soapsuds I was going to wash them in, for I had come with soap and water and evil intentions - I'll blow it to foam and use it for soap bubbles instead. Look at the splendor! Perhaps there's a fairy tale in each. And the bubble grows so large with radiant colors, looking as if there were a silver pearl lying inside it!

The bubble swayed, and drifted to the door, and burst; but the door sprung wide open, and there was Mother Fairy Tale herself! Yes, now she will tell you better than I can about - I won't say the name - the little green ones.

"Tree lice!" said Mother Fairy Tale. "You should call things by their right names; if you do not always dare to do so, you should at least be able to do it in a fairy tale!"