

The Drop of Water

Hans Christian Andersen

Of course, you must know what a microscope is, that round magnifying glass which makes everything look hundreds of times larger than it really is. If you take it and hold it close to your eye and look at a single drop of ditchwater, you'll see thousands of strange little creatures, such as you couldn't imagine living in a drop of water. But they are really there. They look almost like a plateful of shrimp, all jumping and crowding against each other, and they are so ferocious they tear off each other's arm and legs; yet in their own way they are happy and merry.

Now, once there was an old man whom his neighbors called Kribble-Krable, for that was his name. He always tried to make the best of everything, and if he couldn't do it any other way he would try magic.

One day he sat with his eye glued to his microscope, peering at a drop of water taken from a puddle in the ditch. My! How it crawled and squirmed! All those thousands of little imps leaping and springing about, devouring each other, or pulling each other to pieces.

"This is too hideous for words!" said the old Kribble-Krable. "There must be some way to make them live in peace and quiet and each mind his own business." But though he thought and thought he couldn't find the answer. So he decided to use magic. "At least I can give them a color," he said, "so I can see them better." And then he let fall into the water a tiny drop of something that looked like red wine, but was really witches' blood, the very finest kind, and worth two pennies. Instantly the strange little creatures became red all over, and the drop of water now looked like a whole town full of naked wild men.

"What have you got there?" asked another old magician, who had no name at all, which made him very distinguished.

"If you can guess what it is," replied Kribble-Krable, "I'll give it to you. But it's not very easy to find out if one doesn't know."

So the nameless magician peered down through the microscope. The scene before his eyes really resembled a town where all the inhabitants ran about without clothing. What a terrible sight it was! But it was still more horrible to see them kick and cuff, and struggle and fight, and pull and bite at each other. All those on the bottom were struggling to get to the top, and those on the top were being pushed to the bottom. "Look! Look!" the creatures seemed to be crying. "His leg is longer than mine! Bah! Off with it! And here's one with a little lump behind his ear! An innocent little lump, but it hurts him, and it'll hurt him more!" And they hacked at it and tore at him and devoured him, all because of the little lump.

But one sat very quiet and still, all by itself, like a modest maiden, wishing for nothing but peace and quiet. But the others couldn't stand for that—they pulled her out, beat her, cut her, and ate her.

This is extremely amusing!" said the magician.

"Yes, but what do you think it is?" asked Kribble-Krable. "Can you find out?"

"Why, that's easy to see," answered the magician. "Of course, it is Copenhagen, or some other large city. I can't tell which, for they all look alike. But it's certainly some large city."

"It's a drop of ditchwater!" said Kribble-Krable.