

THE DUNG BEETLE

The emperor's horse was given gold shoes, a gold shoe on each hoof.

Why was it given gold shoes?

It was an extremely handsome animal, had fine legs, such wise eyes and a mane that hung like a silk veil down his neck. He had carried his master through gunsmoke and hails of bullets, heard the bullets whistle and sing past; he had bit and lashed out around him, also done battle when enemies thrust in close; leapt with his emperor on his back over the horse of a fallen foe, saved his emperor's crown of red gold – and therefore the emperor's horse was given gold shoes, a gold shoe on each hoof.

And now the dung beetle crawled out.

'First the large, then the small,' it said, 'though size doesn't count for anything.' And it stretched out its spindly legs.

'What do you want?' the smith asked.

'Gold shoes!' the dung beetle answered.

'You can't be right in the head!' the smith said, 'do you want gold shoes too?'

'Gold shoes!' the dung beetle said. 'Aren't I just as good as that great beast that has to be attended to, currycombed, taken care of, have food and drink. Don't I belong to the emperor's stables as well?'

'But why do you think the horse has been given gold shoes?' the smith asked, 'don't you understand why?'

'Understand? I understand that this is treating me with contempt,' the dung beetle said, 'it's an insult – and so now I'm off into the great wide world!'

'Be off with you, then,' the smith said.

'Coarse fellow!' the dung beetle said, and went outside, whistled a little tune, and now it came to a very presentable small flower garden where there was a beautiful scent of roses and lavender.

'Isn't it lovely here!' said one of the small ladybirds that flew around with black dots on their red, shield-strong wings. 'What a sweet fragrance and how beautiful it is here!'

'I'm used to better!' the dung beetle said. 'Do you call this beautiful? There's not even a dung heap!'

And on it went, into the shade of a large stock; a caterpillar was crawling on it.

'How delightful the world is!' the caterpillar said, 'the sun's so warm! Everything is so agreeable! and when I one day fall asleep and die, as people refer to it, I will wake up and find myself a butterfly!'

'You're imagining things!' the dung beetle said, 'now we're flying around like butterflies! I come from the emperor's stables, but no one there, not even the emperor's favourite horse, who goes round with my discarded gold shoes, has such fancies. Get wings! Fly! yes, now we're flying off!' and off flew the dung beetle. 'I don't want to get annoyed, but it vexes me even so.'

Then it landed on a large patch of grass; here it lay for the while, then it fell asleep.

Goodness gracious, what a sudden downpour! the dung beetle woke up with all the splashing and wanted to get down into the ground at once, but it couldn't; it turned over, it swam on its stomach and on its back, flying was out of the question, it was sure it would never get away from the spot alive; it lay where it lay and there it would have to stay.

When the weather eased a bit, and the dung beetle had blinked the water out of its eyes, it could just make out something white, it was linen being bleached; it managed to reach it, crept into a fold of the wet linen cloth, it was admittedly not the same as lying in the warm heap in the stables; but there was nothing better to be had here, so it stayed there a whole day, a whole night – and the

rainy weather stayed too. Early the next morning the dung beetle crept out. It was so irritated with the climate.

On the linen two frogs were sitting; their bright eyes gleamed with sheer pleasure. 'What marvellous weather!' one of them said. 'How refreshing it is! and the linen holds the water so well! it tickles my hind legs as if I was swimming!'

'I wonder,' the other one said, 'if the swallow, who flies about so much, has ever on his many journeys to foreign countries found a better climate than ours; such raw weather, such wetness! it's as if one was lying in a soggy ditch! if that doesn't make one happy, one's no true love of one's fatherland!'

'Have you never been in the emperor's stables?' the dung beetle asked. 'It's wet there, a wetness that's both warm and spicy! that's what I'm used to, that is my climate, but one can't take it with one on one's travels. Isn't there any hotbed in the garden where people of rank such as myself can put up and feel themselves at home?'

But the frogs didn't understand him, or didn't want to understand him.

'I never ask a second time!' the dung beetle said, after it had asked three times without getting an answer.

It went on a bit further, to where a potsherd lay; it wasn't meant to be lying there, but lying as it did, it provided shelter. Here a number of earwig families lived – they don't need much space only social life; the females are particularly over-endowed with motherly love, which is why each one's offspring was the loveliest and cleverest.

'Our son has become engaged!' one mother said, the sweet, innocent thing! his highest aim is one day to creep into the ear of a clergyman. He is so lovably childlike and the engagement keeps him away from youthful excesses! that's so gratifying for a mother!'

'Our son,' another mother said, 'was on the go the moment he came out of the egg; he's a bundle of energy, he's having his youthful fling. That's so immensely gratifying for a mother! Isn't it, Mr Dung Beetle?' They recognised the stranger by its appearance.

'You are both so right!' the dung beetle said, and it was invited inside on the spot, as long as it could manage to fit in under the potsherd.

'You must also see my little earwig!' a third and fourth mother said, 'they are most lovable children and so amusing! they never misbehave except when they have a stomach ache, but that's so frequent among children of their age!'

And then every mother talked about her offspring, and the young earwigs joined in and brought the little fork they had on their tail to tug at the dung beetle's whiskers.

'They're always up to something, the little rascals!' the mothers said, brimming over with motherly love, but all this bored the dung beetle, so it asked if it was a long way from there to the hotbed.

'It's far off in the world, on the other side of the ditch!' the earwig said, 'so far, I hope, none of my children will ever venture, for it would be the death of me!'

'I will try to make it even so!' the dung beetle said and left without saying goodbye – that is the most courteous.

At the ditch it met several of its own kind, all dung beetles.

'This is where we live,' they said. 'We're nice and warm here! Can't we invite you to join us down here in our rich mire! Your journey must surely have tired you out!'

'It has!' the dung beetle said. 'I've lain on linen in rainy weather, and cleanliness really takes it out of me! I've also got rheumatism in my wing-joint from standing in a draught under a potsherd. It's truly refreshing to actually come to one's own kind!'

'You've come from the hotbed perhaps?' the oldest one asked.

‘Higher up! the dung beetle said. ‘I come from the emperor’s stables, where I was born with gold shoes; I’m on a secret mission there’s no point in grilling me about, for I won’t say a word!’

And then the dung beetle climbed down into the rich mire; there three young female dung beetles were sitting, they giggled, for they didn’t know what to say.

‘They’re not engaged!’ their mother said, and then they giggled again, but this time out of shyness.

‘I have not seen any more beautiful in the emperor’s stables!’ the travelling dung beetle said.

‘Please do not lead my young daughters astray! and do not speak to them unless you have honest intentions; – but you have, of course, and I give you my blessing.’

‘Hurrah!’ all the others said, and with that the dung beetle was engaged. First engagement, then wedding, that was not something worth waiting for.

The next day everything went fine, the second day dragged by, but on the third day one had to think about feeding the wife and possibly tiny tots as well.

‘I have allowed myself to be surprised!’ it said, ‘so I think I must surprise you in return!’

And it did. It was gone; gone the whole day, gone the whole night – and the wife was a widow. The other dung beetles said that they had taken a real vagabond into the family – they were now saddled with the wife.

‘Now she can sit there as a spinster again!’ the mother said, ‘sit there as my child! Oh, the horrid brute that’s left her!’

In the meantime, the dung beetle was really on the move, had sailed on a cabbage leaf across the ditch; in the early morning two persons came by, they saw the dung beetle, picked it up, turned it over and over and were both very learned, especially the younger one.

‘Allah sees the black beetle in the black stone in the black mountain! isn’t that what is written in the Koran?’ he asked and translated the dung beetle’s name into Latin and gave an account of its species and characteristics. The elder one was against taking it back home with them, he had just as fine specimens there, he said, and that was not a very polite thing to say, the dung beetle felt, so it flew out of his hand, flew quite a long way – its wings had dried out – and reached the hothouse where, since one of the windows was ajar, it was able to squeeze in and bury itself in the fresh manure.

‘It’s really nice here!’ it said.

Soon it fell asleep and dreamt that the emperor’s horse had fallen and that Mr. Dung Beetle had been given its gold shoes and promised a further two. That was most agreeable and when the dung beetle woke up, it crawled out and looked up. What magnificence there was in the hothouse! large fan palms spread out high up, the sun made them transparent, and beneath them there was a profusion of greenery and a gleam of flowers, as red as fire, yellow as amber and white as new-fallen snow.

‘What sumptuous plant life! just think what it will taste like when it starts to rot!’ the dung beetle said. ‘This is a good larder; there must be members of the family here; I’ll go on a search to see if I had find anyone I can associate with. I’m proud, and proud of it!’ And it set off, still thinking of its dream of the dead horse and gold shoes it had gained.

Suddenly a hand seized the dung beetle, it was squeezed and turned over and over.

The gardener’s young son and a playmate were in the hothouse, had seen the dung beetle and wanted to amuse themselves with it; placed in a vine leaf it was put in a warm trouser pocket, it scratched and scrabbled, was given a pinch by the boy, who quickly went over to the large lake at the end of the garden, where it was placed in an old, cracked clog that had lost its instep; a stick was bound to it as a mast, and the dung beetle was lashed to it with a piece of woollen thread; now it was a skipper and was to set out on a voyage.

It was a very large inland lake, the dung beetle thought it was an ocean and was so surprised that it fell onto its back and kicked away with its legs.

The clog sailed off, there was a current, but if the craft got too far out, the boy would immediately roll up his trouser legs and go out and fetch it, but when it started to drift again, the boys were strictly ordered away, so they hurried off and left the clog to its own devices; it drifted further and further from the land, always further out, it was terrible for the dung beetle; it couldn't fly, it was bound to the mast.

It was visited by a fly.

'Lovely weather we're having!' the fly said. 'Here's a good place to rest, to bask in the sun. You've a most pleasant spot here!'

'You speak to the extent your reason allows! Can't you see I've been tethered?'

'I'm not!' the fly said and off it flew.

'Now I know the world!' the dung beetle said, 'it is a base world! I'm the only honest one in it! First they refuse to give me gold shoes, then I have to lie on wet linen, stand in a draught and finally they foist a wife onto me. If I take a bold step out into the world and see how one can fare and how I would fare, along comes a young pup and lashes me to the mast out on the wild ocean. And meanwhile the emperor's horse goes around in gold shoes! that annoys me most of all; but one can't expect any sympathy in this world! the course of my life is highly interesting, but what use is that when nobody knows about it! The world doesn't deserve to know about it either, otherwise it would have given me gold shoes in the emperor's stables when his favourite horse was shod and stretched its legs out. If I had been given gold shoes, I would have been a credit to the stables – now it has lost me and the world has lost me, it's all over!'

But all wasn't over yet, for along came a boat with some young girls in it.

'There's a clog out there on the water!' one of them said.

'There's a tiny creature tethered to it!' another one said.

They were right alongside the clog, took it up, and one of the girls took out her small scissors, cut through the woollen thread without harming the dung beetle and when they came ashore, she placed it in the grass.

'Crawl, crawl! fly, fly if you can!' she said. 'Freedom's a wonderful thing!'

And the dung beetle flew straight through the open window of a large building and sank down into the fine soft, long mane of the emperor's favourite horse, which was standing in the stables where it and the dung beetle had their home; it clung to the mane and sat there collecting its thoughts. 'Here I am, sitting on the emperor's favourite horse! as a rider! What did I say! yes, now everything is clear to me! it's a good idea, and a correct one. Why did the horse get gold shoes? That's what the smith asked me too. Now I realise why! It was given gold shoes because of me!'

And this put the dung beetle in a good mood.

'Travel clears the mind!' it said.

The sun shone down on it, shone so beautifully. 'The world's not so bad even so,' the dung beetle said, 'one just needs to know how to take it! The world was delightful because the emperor's favourite horse had been given gold shoes since the dung beetle was to be its rider.

'Now I'll climb down to the other dung beetles and tell them how much has been done for me; I'll tell them about all the pleasant things I have experienced on my foreign trip, and I'll say that I'm staying at home until the horse has worn out its gold shoes!'