

The Happy Family

Hans Christian Andersen

The biggest leaf we have in this country is certainly the burdock leaf. If you hold one in front of your little stomach, it's just like a real apron; and in rainy weather, if you lay it on your head, it does almost as well as an umbrella. It's really amazingly large. Now, a burdock never grows alone; no, when you see one you'll always see others around it. It's a splendid sight; and all this splendor is nothing more than food for snails-the big white snails which the fine people in olden days used to have made into fricassees. When they had eaten them, they would smack their lips and say, "My! How good that is!" For somehow they had the idea that the snails tasted delicious. You see, these snails lived on the burdock leaves, and that's why the burdock was first grown.

There was a certain old manor house where the people didn't eat snails any more. The snails had almost died out, but the burdock hadn't. These grew and grew on all the walks and flower beds-they couldn't be stopped-until the whole place was a forest of burdocks. Here and there stood an apple or a plum tree, but except for that, people wouldn't have thought there had ever been a garden there. Everywhere was burdock, and among the burdocks lived the last two incredibly old snails!

They themselves didn't know how old they were, but they could remember very clearly that once there had been a great many more of them, that they had descended from a prominent foreign family, and they knew perfectly well that the whole forest had been planted just for them and their family.

They had never been away from home, but they did know that somewhere there was something called a manor house, and that there you were boiled until you turned black, and were laid on a silver dish; but what happened afterwards they hadn't the least idea. Furthermore, they couldn't imagine what it would be like to be boiled and laid on a silver dish, but everyone said it must be very wonderful and a great distinction. Neither the cockchafer nor the toad nor the earthworm, whom they asked about it, could give them any information. None of their families had ever been boiled or laid on silver dishes.

So the old white snails knew they were by far the most important people in the world. The forest was there just for their sake, and the manor house existed just so that they could be boiled and laid on silver dishes!

The two old snails led a quiet and happy life, and since they were childless they had adopted a little orphan snail, which they were bringing up as their own child. He wouldn't grow very large, for he was only a common snail; but the two old snails - and especially the mother snail-thought it was easy to see how well he was growing. And she begged the father snail to touch the little snail's shell, if he couldn't see it, and so he felt it and found that she was right.

One day it rained very hard.

"Just listen to it drum on the burdock leaves!" cried Father Snail. "Rum-dum-dum! Rum-dum-dum!"

"Drops are also coming down here"! said the mother. "It's coming straight down the stalks, and it'll be wet down here before you know it. I'm certainly glad we have our own good houses and the little one has his own. We're better off than any other creatures; it's quite plain that we're the most important people in the world. We have our own houses from our very birth, and the burdock forest has been planted just for us. I wonder how far it extends, and what lies beyond it."

"There can't be anything beyond," said Father Snail, "that's any better than we have here."

I have nothing in the world to wish for."

"Well, I have," said the mother. "I'd like to be taken to the manor house and boiled and laid on a silver dish. All our ancestors had that done to them, and, believe me, it must be something quite uncommon!"

"Maybe the manor house has fallen to pieces," suggested Father Snail. "Or perhaps the burdock forest has grown over it, so that the people can't get out at all. Don't be in such a hurry-but then you're always hurrying so. And the little one is beginning to do the same thing. Why, he's been creeping up that stalk for three days. It really makes my head dizzy to watch him go!"

"Don't scold him," said Mother Snail. "He crawls very carefully. He'll bring us much joy, and we old folk don't have anything else to live for. But have you ever thought where we can find a wife for him? Don't you think there might be some more of our kind of people farther back in the burdock woods?"

"I suppose there may be black snails back there," said the old man.

"Black snails without houses! Much too vulgar! And they're conceited, anyway. But let's ask the ants to find out for us; they're always running around as if they had important business. They're sure to know of a wife for our little snail."

"Certainly, I know a very beautiful bride," said one of the ants. "But I don't think she'd do, because she's a queen!"

"That doesn't matter," said Mother Snail emphatically. "Does she have a house?"

"She has a castle!" replied the ant. "The most beautiful ant's castle, with seven hundred corridors!"

"Thank you very much," said Mother Snail, "but our boy shall not go into an anthill! If you don't know of anything better, we'll ask the white gnats to find out for us. They flit around in the rain and sunshine, and they know this forest inside and out."

"We have just the wife for him," said the gnats. "A hundred man-steps from here a little snail with a house is sitting on a gooseberry bush. She is all alone in the world, and quite old enough to marry. It's only a hundred man-steps from here!"

"Fine, but she must come to him," said the old couple. "Our child has a whole burdock forest, and she has only a bush."

And so the gnats had the little maiden snail come over. It took her eight days to get there, but that was the wonderful part of it-for it showed she had the right sort of dignity.

And then they had a fine wedding! Six glow-worms lighted up the place as well as they could, but aside from that it was a very quiet ceremony, for the old people did not care for feasting or merriment. A charming speech was made by Mother Snail, but Father Snail couldn't say a word; he was too deeply moved. And so she gave the young couple the whole burdock forest for a dowry, and repeated what she had always said-that it was the finest place in the world, and that the young people, if they lived honorably and had many children, would someday be taken with their young ones to the manor house, to be boiled black and laid on a silver dish. And when Mother Snail's speech was finished, the old people crept into their houses and never came out again, for they went to sleep.

Now the young couple ruled the forest and did have many children. But since none of them were ever boiled and laid in silver dishes, they decided that the manor house must have fallen into ruins and that all the people in the world had died out. And since nobody contradicted them, I think they must have been right. So the rain beat on the burdock leaves, to play the drum for them, and the sun shone, to color the forest for them; and they were very happy. The whole family was happy-extremely happy, indeed they were.

