

Dung beetle

The emperor's horse was granted golden horseshoes, one for each leg. For what reason?

She was marvelously beautiful, with slender legs, intelligent eyes, and a silky mane cascading down her neck like a long mantle. She carried her master through powder smoke, under a hail of bullets, heard their whistling and buzzing, and herself fought off the advancing enemies. She defended herself against them unto life and death, leaped with her rider in a single bound over a fallen enemy horse, and thereby saved both the emperor's golden crown and his very life, which is dearer than a golden crown. That is why she was granted golden horseshoes, one for each leg. And here comes the dung beetle.

"First the great ones of this world, then the small!" he said. "Though size, strictly speaking, is not the point!" And he stretched out his skinny little legs.

"What do you want?" asked the blacksmith.

"Golden horseshoes!" answered the beetle.

"You must be out of your mind!" said the blacksmith. "You too want golden horseshoes?"

"Yes!" replied the beetle. "How am I worse than that huge brute, who still needs to be cared for? Cleaned, fed, and watered! Am I not from the imperial stables myself?"

"But for what reason are golden horseshoes given to horses?" asked the blacksmith. "Do you understand?"

"Understand? I understand that I am being insulted!" said the dung beetle. "This is a direct offense to me! I will not endure it; I shall go wherever my eyes lead!"

"Be off with you!" said the blacksmith.

"Boor!" retorted the dung beetle, crawled out of the stable, flew a short distance, and found himself in a lovely flower garden where roses and lavender fraganced the air.

"Isn't it wonderfully nice here?" asked the beetle a hard-winged ladybug, all covered with black spots. "How sweetly it smells here, how beautiful everything is!"

"Well, I am accustomed to better!" answered the dung beetle. "In your opinion, this is splendid?! There isn't even a single dung heap!.."

And he proceeded further, beneath the shade of a large stock; along its stem crawled a caterpillar.

"How wonderful is God's world!" she said. "The sun warms us! How cheerful, how pleasant! And after I finally fall asleep or die, as they say, I shall awaken already as a butterfly!"

"Yes, yes, keep dreaming!" said the dung beetle. "So we shall all fly away as butterflies! I am from the imperial stables, yet even there nobody, not even the emperor's favorite horse, who now wears my golden horseshoes, imagines anything of the sort. To get wings, to fly?! Yes, that's just what we'll do right now!" And he flew away. "I wouldn't like to be angry, but one cannot help becoming angry!"

Then he plopped down onto a large meadow, lay there for a while, and fell asleep.

Good heavens, what a downpour began! The dung beetle woke from the noise and wanted to quickly burrow into the earth, but no such luck. He struggled and struggled, tried to swim on his back and on his belly—flying was out of the question—but all in vain. No, truly, he would not escape from here alive! So he remained lying where he was.

The rain paused slightly; the beetle blinked water from his eyes and saw something white nearby; it was linen that women had laid out to bleach; the beetle made his way to it and crept into a fold of the wet cloth. Of course, this was not the same as burying oneself in warm dung in the stable, but nothing better presented itself here, so he remained lying there all day and all night—the rain kept pouring. In the morning the dung beetle crawled out; he was terribly angry at the climate.

Two frogs sat upon the linen; their eyes sparkled with delight.

"Glorious weather!" said one. "What freshness! This linen holds the water wonderfully! My hind legs are even itching: I feel like swimming right away!"

"I would like to know," said the other, "whether the swallow, who flies so far, has found anywhere a better climate than ours? Such rains, such dampness—it's marvelous! Truly, it's like sitting in a wet ditch! Whoever does not rejoice in such weather is no true son of his fatherland!"

"So, you have never been to the imperial stables?" asked the dung beetle. "There it is both damp and warm, and smells wonderful! That is what I am accustomed to!"

The climate there suits me, but one cannot take it along on a journey! Is there not at least a hotbed somewhere in this garden where distinguished persons such as myself might find shelter and feel at home?"

But the frogs either did not understand him or did not wish to understand.

"I never ask twice!" declared the dung beetle, having repeated his question three times and still received no answer.

The beetle moved on and stumbled upon a shard from a pot. It ought not to have been lying there, but since it was, shelter could be found beneath it. Several families of mites lived under it. They required no space—only company. The female mites are distinguished by maternal tenderness, and therefore each little one was a marvel of wit and beauty.

"Our son is engaged!" said one mother. "Dear innocence! His dearest dream is to crawl into a priest's ear. He is still quite a child; the engagement will restrain him from foolishness. Ah, what joy for a mother!"

"And our son," said another, "has barely hatched, and already he is up to mischief! Such a lively fellow! Well, youth must have its fling! This is a great joy for a mother! Is it not so, Mr. Dung Beetle?" They recognized the newcomer by his figure.

"You are both right!" said the beetle, and the mother mites invited him to crawl toward them, as far as he could squeeze under the shard.

"You must also see my little ones!" said a third, and then a fourth mother. "Ah, they are the dearest little creatures and so amusing! They always behave well, unless their tummies hurt—and at their age one cannot avoid that!"

And each mother spoke about her children; the children themselves joined the conversation and put their little pincers on their tails to work—tugging at the dung beetle's whiskers.

"What won't these little rascals think up!" said the mothers, sweating with tenderness; but all this had already grown tiresome to the dung beetle, and he asked how far it still was to the hotbed.

"Oh, far, far away! It is on the other side of the ditch!" the mother mites answered in one voice. "I hope none of my children will think of venturing so far, or I shall die!"

"Well, I shall try to reach it!" said the dung beetle and departed without saying goodbye—that is the highest style.

By the ditch he met his own kin, fellow dung beetles.

"We live here!" they said. "It is extremely cozy with us! Please come to our juicy little spot! You must be tired from your journey?"

"Yes!" answered the beetle. "While the rain poured, I lay all the time on the linen, and such cleanliness would exhaust anyone, let alone me. Then I had to stand under a clay shard in a draft, and caught rheumatism in my forewing! It is good finally to find oneself among one's own kind!"

"Perhaps you are from the hotbed?" asked the eldest of the dung beetles.

"Aim higher!" said the beetle. "I am from the imperial stables; there I was born with golden horseshoes on my feet. And I am traveling on a secret mission. But do not question me; I shall tell you nothing anyway."

And the dung beetle crawled away with them into the rich mud. There sat three young ladies of their own kind, giggling, not knowing what to say.

"They are not yet betrothed!" said the mother, and they giggled again, this time from embarrassment.

"I have not encountered more beautiful young ladies even in the imperial stables!" said the traveling beetle.

"Oh, do not spoil my girls! And do not speak to them unless you have serious intentions. Though of course you do have them, and I give you my blessing!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the others, and the beetle became a fiancé. The engagement was followed immediately by the wedding—why postpone?

The next day passed well, the second so-so, but on the third it was already necessary to think about feeding his wife, and perhaps also the children. "So they've tricked me!" he said to himself. "Well then, I shall trick them too!" And so he did—he left. A day passed without him, a night passed without him—the wife remained a widow. The other dung beetles declared that they had taken into their family a genuine vagabond. Of course! Now the wife was left on their hands!

"Then let her again be considered a young lady!" said the mother. "Let her live with me as before. Let us spit on that scoundrel who abandoned her!"

And he crossed the ditch on a cabbage leaf. In the morning two people appeared, saw the beetle, took him, and began turning him over in their hands. Both were terribly learned, especially the boy.

"'Allah sees the black beetle on the black stone of the black mountain,' is that not written in the Koran?" he asked and, naming the dung beetle in Latin, stated to which class of insects he belonged. The elder scholar advised the boy not to take the beetle home with him—it was not worth it, they

There were already specimens just as good. The beetle found such speech rude, so he simply flew out of the scientists' hands. Now his wings had dried, and he could fly quite far; he flew all the way to the greenhouse and slipped very conveniently inside—one window stood open. Having gotten in there, the beetle hastened to burrow into fresh manure.

"Oh, how splendid!" he said.

Soon he fell asleep and dreamed that the royal horse had died, and he himself, the dung beetle gentleman, received its golden horseshoes, with a promise to give him two more besides. How pleasant that was! Waking up, the beetle crawled out and looked around. What luxury! Enormous palms spread their leaves like fans high above, through which the sun shone; below, grass grew green everywhere, flowers swarmed in multitudes—fiery red, amber-yellow, and white as freshly fallen snow.

"What superb vegetation! How tasty it will be once all this rots!" said the dung beetle. "A fine pantry! Surely some relative of mine lives here. I must set out to search, find someone with whom I can make acquaintance. After all, I am proud and boast of it!" And the beetle crawled along, thinking about his dream, about the dead horse, and about the golden horseshoes.

Suddenly someone's hand seized him, squeezed him tight, and began twisting and turning him...

The gardener's little son had come to the greenhouse with a companion; they saw the dung beetle and decided to have some fun with him. They wrapped the beetle in a grape leaf and put it into the warm pocket of their trousers. The beetle began to twist and climb about there, but the boy pressed him down with his hand and ran together with his companion to the far end of the garden, to the large lake. There they placed the beetle in an old broken wooden shoe, fixed a splinter in the middle of it as a mast, tied the beetle to it with a woolen thread, and launched the shoe upon the water. Now the beetle had become a skipper and had to set sail.

The lake was very, very large; to the dung beetle it seemed he was sailing across an ocean, and this astonished him so much that he fell on his back and kicked his legs.

The current carried the shoe away from the shore, but as soon as it drifted a little farther out, one of the boys would roll up his trouser legs, splash through the

water, and pull it back. But then the shoe drifted away again, and just at that moment the boys were called home so insistently that in their haste they forgot all about the shoe. Meanwhile, the shoe was carried farther and farther away. What horror! The beetle could not fly away—he was tied to the mast.

A fly came visiting him.

"What lovely weather!" she said. "Here one can rest and bask in the sun! You are very well off here."

"You chatter without knowing what you're talking about! Don't you see—I am tied?"

"But I am not!" said the fly, and flew away.

"Now I have learned about the world!" said the dung beetle. "How low it is! I alone am decent! First they bypass me with golden horseshoes, then I must lie on wet canvas, stand in a draft, and finally, they foist a wife upon me! Hardly have I taken a bold step into the world, looked around and examined things, when some urchin appears and sends me, bound, out into the wild sea! Meanwhile, the royal horse struts about in golden horseshoes! That is what torments me most! But on this earth, do not expect justice! My story is very interesting, but what good is it if no one knows it! Indeed, the world does not deserve to know it; otherwise, it would have given the golden horseshoes to me when the royal horse stretched out its legs for them. Had I received the golden horseshoes, I would have become the ornament of the stable; but now I am lost to them, the world has lost me, and all is over!"

But evidently, the end of everything had not yet come: a boat appeared on the lake, and several young girls sat in it.

"There floats a wooden shoe!" said one.

"And a poor insect tied fast and firm!" said another.

They drew level with the shoe, caught it, and one of the girls took out a pair of scissors and carefully cut the woolen thread without causing the beetle the slightest harm. Having reached the shore, she placed him on the grass.

"Crawl, crawl; fly, fly, if you can!" she said to him. "Freedom is a splendid thing!"

And the dung beetle flew straight through an open window of some large building, where he tiredly alighted upon the fine, soft, long mane of the favorite royal horse, which stood in the stable—the beetle's own native stable. The beetle clung tightly to the horse's mane, trying to catch his breath and recover from exhaustion.

"Well, here I sit upon the favorite royal horse, like a rider! What am I saying?! Now everything is clear to me! What an idea! And a correct one! 'For what reason did the horse receive golden horseshoes?' the blacksmith asked me then. Now I understand! She received them because of me!"

And the beetle cheered up again.

"Travel clarifies the mind!" he said. The sun shone directly upon him and shone so beautifully! "The world, in essence, is not so bad after all!" continued the dung beetle reasoning. "One only needs to know how to take hold of it!"

And indeed, how could the world not be good, if the emperor's favorite horse received golden horseshoes merely because a dung beetle had ridden upon her?

"Now I shall crawl to other beetles and tell them what they have done for me! I shall also tell about all the delights of my foreign journey and say that henceforth I shall stay at home until the horse wears out her golden horseshoes."