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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Happy Family

Hans Christian Andersen

The burdock leaf is definitely the biggest and greenest leaf in the land. When you hold it in front of your belly, it looks like an apron! When you put it on your head, it looks like an umbrella in the rain! The burdock leaf is just so incredibly large.

A burdock leaf never grows alone. No, wherever one grows, more will grow. Snails love to feast on burdock leaves and fatten themselves up. In the past, refined people used to eat the white snails with potatoes and vegetables. They would say, "Oh, how delicious." So, a lot of burdock was planted so that the snails could fatten up.

Now, there was once an old castle where nobody ate snails anymore. The snails had completely died out, but the burdock had not. It grew and grew over paths and flowerbeds. You couldn't stop it. A whole forest of burdock had grown. Here and there stood an apple or a plum tree. Otherwise, you would never have known that it was actually a garden. Everything was covered with burdock.

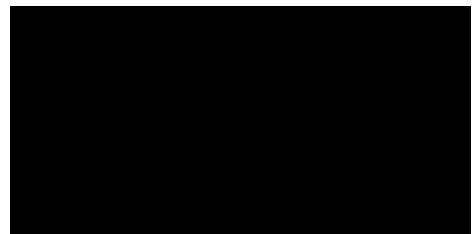
In this forest of burdock lived the last two very old snails.

They didn't know how old they were, but they could still remember that there used to be many more snails. They remembered that they belonged to a family that came from afar. They also remembered that the forest of burdock had been planted for them.

They had never been outside the forest, but they knew that there was something called a castle in the world. There, a snail would be cooked. Then it would be placed, black and all, on a silver platter. What happened next, they knew nothing about. They couldn't even imagine what it was like to be cooked and placed on a silver platter. But it must be delicious and an extraordinary honor to experience.

The beetle, the toad, and the earthworm said, when the snails asked, that they had also heard about it. They had no experience with being cooked and placed on a silver platter.

The old white snails were the most important snails in the world. They knew that.



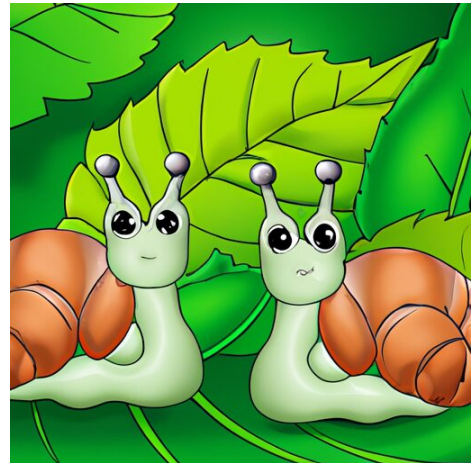
In the forest, only a castle had been built for them so that they could be cooked and placed on a silver platter.

The snails now lived lonely but very happily. They didn't have any children, so they took in an "ordinary" snail. They raised the little one as if it were their own child. But the snail wouldn't grow and fatten up. It was just an "ordinary" snail. The old snails, especially the Snail Mother, thought that the little one was gradually getting bigger and fatter.

The Snail Father also felt the shell and thought she was right.

One day, it rained heavily. "Listen to how hard the rain is pounding on the burdock leaves," said the Snail Father.

The Snail Mother said, "I can see the drops coming! They are running down the stem! You'll see that it's getting wet here! I'm so glad that we and the little one are always safe. More has been done for us snails than for other animals. You can see that we are important creatures. From birth, we have had a house and the forest of burdock has been specially planted for us. Yet, I would like to know where the forest extends to and what's beyond it."



"There is nothing beyond," said the Snail Father. "It can't be better anywhere else than with us. I have nothing more to wish for."

"But I would," said the mother. "I would like to go to the castle, be cooked and placed on a silver platter. That's what happened to all our ancestors. So you can be sure it must be something very special."

"Maybe the castle has long since collapsed," said the Snail Father. "Maybe the forest of coltsfoot has already grown over it and people can't get out anymore. There's no hurry. You're always so impatient. Our little one is starting to do that too. He's been crawling up the stem for three days now. It gives me a headache just watching him."

"Don't scold him," said the Snail Mother. "He crawls so neatly and calmly. We'll have a lot of fun with him. And we old folks don't have anything else to live for. Have you ever thought about how we can find a wife for him? Do you think there might be someone of our kind living far away in the forest?"

"Black snails are plentiful, I think," said the old Snail Father. "Black snails without a house. But that's really beneath us. Those creatures think they're something

special too. We could use the ants as brokers. They run back and forth all day, as if they have a lot to do. They probably know a nice wife for our little snail."

"We know who the Most Beautiful is," said the ants. "But we're afraid it won't work out. She's the Queen."

"That doesn't matter," said the old snail. "Does she have a house?"

"She has a castle," said the ants. "The most beautiful ant castle you can imagine, with seven hundred tunnels!"

"Thank you very much," said the Snail Mother, "but our son won't go live in an ant hill. If you don't know anything better, we better ask the mosquitoes. They fly far and wide, in rain and sunshine. They know the whole forest inside and out.

"We have a wife for him," said the mosquitoes. "A hundred human steps away, there's a little snail with a house on a gooseberry bush. It's a very lonely little snail, old enough to get married. Just walk a hundred human steps from here and you'll find it."

"It's a better idea if she comes to him," said the old snails, "our son has a whole forest of coltsfoot, she only has a bush."

Then they brought the Snail Lady. It took eight days for her to come. That was the fun part. Now everyone could see that she really belonged to the Snail family.

A wedding was held. Six glowworms provided light at the ceremony. Everything else was done in silence. There was no joyous celebration with music. Old snails can't stand noise and merriment.

The Snail Mother gave a wonderful speech. The Snail Father said nothing, he was too moved.

They gave the whole forest as an inheritance to the newlyweds. And they said what they had always said: "The coltsfoot forest was the best place in the world. If they lived a proper and decent life and multiplied, their children would surely come to the castle and be cooked black and placed on silver platters."

After that speech, the old snails crawled into their houses and never came out again. They slept.

The young snail couple became the masters of the forest. They had many children and grandchildren. But they were never cooked black and never placed on silver platters. So they thought the castle must have collapsed and all the people in the world must have died.

And because no one contradicted them, this was also the truth. The rain continued to patter happily, like a drum, on the hoefblad leaves. The sun shone on the forest every day, giving beautiful colors to the leaves. They were very happy together. The whole Snail family was happy and content. That was how it was. And that was how it remained forever.



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