Thumbelina

Hans Christian Andersen

There was once a woman who wished for a very little child; but she did not know where she should procure one. So she went to an old witch, and said,

'I do so very much wish for a little child! can you not tell me where I can get one?'

'Oh! that could easily be managed,' said the witch. 'There you have a barleycorn: that is not of the kind which grows in the countryman's field, and which the chickens get to eat. Put it into a flower-pot, and you shall see what you shall see.'

'Thank you,' said the woman; and she gave the witch a groat.

Then she went home and planted the barleycorn, and immediately there grew up a great handsome flower, which looked like a tulip; but the leaves were tightly closed, as though it were still a bud.

'It is a beautiful flower,' said the woman; and she kissed its beautiful yellow and red leaves. But just as she kissed it the flower opened with a loud crack. It was a real tulip, as one could now see; but in the middle of the flower there sat upon the green stamens a little maiden, delicate and graceful to behold. She was scarcely half a thumb's length in height, and therefore she was called Thumbelina.

A neat polished walnut-shell served Thumbelina for a cradle, blue violet-leaves were her mattresses, with a rose-leaf for a coverlet. There she slept at night; but in the daytime she played upon the table, where the woman had put a plate with a wreath of flowers around it, whose stalks stood in water; on the water swam a great tulip-leaf, and on this the little maiden could sit, and row from one side of the plate to the other, with two white horse-hairs for oars. That looked pretty indeed! She could also sing, and, indeed, so delicately and sweetly, that the like had never been heard.

One night as she lay in her pretty bed, there came a horrid old Toad hopping in at the window, in which one pane was broken. The Toad was very ugly, big, and damp: it hopped straight down upon the table, where Thumbelina lay sleeping under the red rose-leaf.

'That would be a handsome wife for my son,' said the Toad; and she took the walnut-shell in which Thumbelina lay asleep, and hopped with it through the window down into the garden.

There ran a great broad brook; but the margin was swampy and soft, and here the Toad dwelt with her son. Ugh! he was ugly, and looked just like his mother. 'Croak! croak! brek kek-kex!' that was all he could say when he saw the graceful little maiden in the walnut-shell.

'Don't speak so loud, or she will awake,' said the old Toad. 'She might run away from us yet, for she is as light as a bit of swan's-down. We will put her out in the brook upon one of the broad water-lily leaves. That will be just like an island for her, she is so small and light. Then she can't get away, while we put the state-room under the mud in order, where you are to live and keep house together.'

Out in the brook there grew many water-lilies with broad green leaves, which looked as if they were floating on the water. The leaf which lay farthest out was also the greatest of all, and to that the old Toad swam out and laid the walnut-shell upon it with Thumbelina. The poor little thing woke early in the morning, and when she saw where she was, she began to cry very bitterly; for there was water on every side of the great green leaf, and she could not get to land at all. The old Toad sat down in the mud, decking out her room with sedges and yellow water-lilies—it was to be made very pretty for the new daughter-in-law; then she swam out, with her ugly son, to the leaf on which Thumbelina was. They wanted to take her pretty bed, which was to be put in the bridal chamber before she went in there herself. The old Toad bowed low before her in the water, and said,

'Here is my son; he will be your husband, and you will live splendidly together in the mud.'

'Croak! croak! brek-kek-kex!' was all the son could say.

Then they took the elegant little bed, and swam away with it; but Thumbelina sat all alone upon the green leaf and wept, for she did not like to live at the nasty Toad's, and have her ugly son for a husband. The little fishes swimming in the water below had both seen the Toad, and had also heard what she said; therefore they stretched forth their heads, for they wanted to see the little girl. So soon as they saw her they considered her so pretty that they felt very sorry she should have to go down to the ugly Toad. No, that must never be! They assembled together in the water around the green stalk which held the leaf on which the little maiden stood, and with their teeth they gnawed away the stalk, and so the leaf swam down the stream; and away went Thumbelina far away, where the Toad could not get at her.

Thumbelina sailed by many places, and the little birds which sat in the bushes saw her, and said, 'What a lovely little girl!' The leaf swam away with her, farther and farther; so Thumbelina travelled out of the country.

A graceful little white butterfly continued to flutter round her, and at last alighted on the leaf. Thumbelina pleased him, and she was so delighted, for now the Toad could not reach her; and it was so beautiful where she was floating along—the sun shone upon the water, it was just like shining gold. She took her girdle and bound one end of it round the butterfly, fastening the other end of the ribbon to the leaf. The leaf now glided onward much faster, and Thumbelina too, for she stood upon the leaf.

There came a big Cockchafer flying up; and he saw her, and immediately clasped his claws round her slender waist, and flew with her up into a tree. The green leaf went swimming down the brook, and the butterfly with it; for he was fastened to the leaf, and could not get away from it.

Mercy! how frightened poor little Thumbelina was when the Cockchafer flew with her up into the tree! But especially she was sorry for the fine white butterfly whom she had bound fast to the leaf, for, if he could not free himself from it, he would be forced to starve to death. The Cockchafer, however, did not trouble himself at all about this. He seated himself with her upon the biggest green leaf of the tree, gave her the sweet part of the flowers to eat, and declared that she was very pretty, though she did not in the least resemble a cockchafer. Afterwards came all the other cockchafers who lived in the tree to pay a visit: they looked at Thumbelina, and the lady cockchafers shrugged their feelers and said,

'Why, she has not even more than two legs!—that has a wretched appearance.'

'She has not any feelers!' cried another.

'Her waist is quite slender—fie! she looks like a human creature—how ugly she is!' said all the lady cockchafers.

And yet Thumbelina was very pretty. Even the Cockchafer who had carried her off thought so; but when all the others declared she was ugly, he believed it at last, and would not have her at all —she might go whither she liked. Then they flew down with her from the tree, and set her upon a daisy, and she wept, because she was so ugly that the cockchafers would not have her; and yet she was the loveliest little being one could imagine, and as tender and delicate as a rose-leaf.

The whole summer through poor Thumbelina lived quite alone in the great wood. She wove herself a bed out of blades of grass, and hung it up under a large burdock leaf, so that she was protected from the rain; she plucked the honey out of the flowers for food, and drank of the dew which stood every morning upon the leaves. Thus summer and autumn passed away; but now came winter, the cold long winter. All the birds who had sung so sweetly to her flew away; trees and flowers shed their leaves; the great burdock leaf under which she had lived shrivelled up, and there remained nothing of it but a yellow withered stalk; and she was dreadfully cold, for

her clothes were torn, and she herself was so frail and delicate—poor little Thumbelina! she was nearly frozen. It began to snow, and every snow-flake that fell upon her was like a whole shovel-full thrown upon one of us, for we are tall, and she was only an inch long. Then she wrapped herself in a dry leaf, but that would not warm her—she shivered with cold.

Close to the wood into which she had now come lay a great corn-field, but the corn was gone long ago; only the naked dry stubble stood up out of the frozen ground. These were just like a great forest for her to wander through; and, oh! how she trembled with cold. Then she arrived at the door of the Field Mouse. This mouse had a little hole under the stubble. There the Field Mouse lived, warm and comfortable, and had a whole room-full of corn—a glorious kitchen and larder. Poor Thumbelina stood at the door just like a poor beggar girl, and begged for a little bit of a barleycorn, for she had not had the smallest morsel to eat for the last two days.

'You poor little creature,' said the Field Mouse—for after all she was a good old Field Mouse —'come into my warm room and dine with me.'

As she was pleased with Thumbelina, she said, 'If you like you may stay with me through the winter, but you must keep my room clean and neat, and tell me stories, for I am very fond of them.'

And Thumbelina did as the kind old Field Mouse bade her, and had a very good time of it.

'Now we shall soon have a visitor,' said the Field Mouse. 'My neighbour is in the habit of visiting me once a week. He is even better off than I am, has great rooms, and a beautiful black velvety fur. If you could only get him for your husband you would be well provided for; but he cannot see at all. You must tell him the very prettiest stories you know.'

But Thumbelina did not care about this; she would not have the neighbour at all, for he was a Mole. He came and paid his visits in his black velvet coat. The Field Mouse told how rich and how learned he was, and how his house was more than twenty times larger than hers; that he had learning, but that he did not like the sun and beautiful flowers, and said nasty things about them, for he had never seen them.

Thumbelina had to sing, and she sang 'Cockchafer, fly away,' and 'When the parson goes afield.' Then the Mole fell in love with her, because of her delicious voice; but he said nothing, for he was a sedate man.

A short time before, he had dug a long passage through the earth from his own house to theirs; and Thumbelina and the Field Mouse obtained leave to walk in this passage as much as they wished. But he begged them not to be afraid of the dead bird which was lying in the passage. It

was an entire bird, with wings and a beak. It certainly must have died only a short time before, when the winter began, and was now buried just where the Mole had made his passage.

The Mole took a bit of decayed wood in his mouth, for that glimmers like fire in the dark; and then he went first and lighted them through the long dark passage. When they came where the dead bird lay, the Mole thrust up his broad nose against the ceiling and pushed the earth, so that a great hole was made, through which the daylight could shine down. In the middle of the floor lay a dead Swallow, his beautiful wings pressed close against his sides, and his head and feet drawn in under his feathers: the poor bird had certainly died of cold. Thumbelina was very sorry for this; she was very fond of all the little birds, who had sung and twittered so prettily for her through the summer; but the Mole gave him a push with his short legs, and said, 'Now he doesn't pipe any more. It must be miserable to be born a little bird. I'm thankful that none of my children can be that: such a bird has nothing but his "tweet-tweet", and has to starve in the winter!'

'Yes, you may well say that, like a sensible man,' observed the Field Mouse. 'Of what use is all this "tweet-tweet" to a bird when the winter comes? He must starve and freeze. But they say that's very aristocratic'

Thumbelina said nothing; but when the two others turned their backs on the bird, she bent down, put the feathers aside which covered his head, and kissed him upon his closed eyes.

'Perhaps it was he who sang so prettily to me in the summer,' she thought. 'How much pleasure he gave me, the dear beautiful bird!'

The Mole now closed up the hole through which the daylight shone in, and accompanied the ladies home. But at night Thumbelina could not sleep at all; so she got up out of her bed, and wove a large beautiful carpet of hay, and carried it and spread it over the dead bird, and laid soft cotton, which she had found in the Field Mouse's room, at the bird's sides, so that he might lie warm in the cold ground.

'Farewell, you pretty little bird!' said she. 'Farewell! and thanks to you for your beautiful song in the summer, when all the trees were green, and the sun shone down warmly upon us.' And then she laid her head on the bird's breast, but at once was greatly startled, for it felt as if something were beating inside there. That was the bird's heart. The bird was not dead; he was only lying there torpid with cold; and now he had been warmed, and came to life again.

In autumn all the swallows fly away to warm countries, but if one happens to be belated, it becomes so cold that it falls down as if dead, and lies where it falls, and then the cold snow covers it.

Thumbelina fairly trembled, she was so startled; for the bird was large, very large, compared with her, who was only an inch in height. But she took courage, laid the cotton closer round the poor bird, and brought a leaf of mint that she had used as her own coverlet, and laid it over the bird's head.

The next night she crept out to him again—and now he was alive, but quite weak; he could only open his eyes for a moment, and look at Thumbelina, who stood before him with a bit of decayed wood in her hand, for she had no other lantern.

'I thank you, you pretty little child,' said the sick Swallow; 'I have been famously warmed. Soon I shall get my strength back again, and I shall be able to fly about in the warm sunshine.'

'Oh,' she said, 'it is so cold without. It snows and freezes. Stay in your warm bed, and I will nurse you.'

Then she brought the Swallow water in the petal of a flower; and the Swallow drank, and told her how he had torn one of his wings in a thorn bush, and thus had not been able to fly as fast as the other swallows, which had sped away, far away, to the warm countries. So at last he had fallen to the ground, but he could remember nothing more, and did not know at all how he had come where she had found him.

The whole winter the Swallow remained there, and Thumbelina nursed and tended him heartily. Neither the Field Mouse nor the Mole heard anything about it, for they did not like the poor Swallow. So soon as the spring came, and the sun warmed the earth, the Swallow bade Thumbelina farewell, and she opened the hole which the Mole had made in the ceiling. The sun shone in upon them gloriously, and the Swallow asked if Thumbelina would go with him; she could sit upon his back, and they would fly away far into the green wood. But Thumbelina knew that the old Field Mouse would be grieved if she left her.

'No, I cannot!' said Thumbelina.

'Farewell, farewell, you good, pretty girl!' said the Swallow; and he flew out into the sunshine. Thumbelina looked after him, and the tears came into her eyes, for she was so fond of the poor Swallow.

'Tweet-weet! tweet-weet!' sang the bird, and flew into the green forest. Thumbelina felt very sad. She did not get permission to go out into the warm sunshine. The corn which was sown in the field over the house of the Field Mouse grew up high into the air; it was quite a thick wood for the poor girl, who was only an inch in height.

'Now you must work at your outfit this summer,' said the Field Mouse to her; for her neighbour, the tiresome Mole with the velvet coat, had proposed to her. 'You shall have woollen and linen clothes both; you will lack nothing when you have become the Mole's wife.'

Thumbelina had to turn the spindle, and the Mole hired four spiders to spin and weave for her day and night. Every evening the Mole paid her a visit; and he was always saying that when the summer should draw to a close, the sun would not shine nearly so hot, for that now it burned the earth almost as hard as a stone. Yes, when the summer should have gone, then he would keep his wedding day with Thumbelina. But she was not glad at all, for she did not like the tiresome Mole. Every morning when the sun rose, and every evening when it went down, she crept out at the door; and when the wind blew the corn ears apart, so that she could see the blue sky, she thought how bright and beautiful it was out here, and wished so much to see her dear Swallow again. But the Swallow did not come back; he had doubtless flown far away, in the fair green forest. When autumn came on, Thumbelina had all her outfit ready.

'In four weeks you shall celebrate your wedding,' said the Field Mouse to her.

But Thumbelina wept, and declared she would not have the tiresome Mole.

'Nonsense,' said the Field Mouse; 'don't be obstinate, or I will bite you with my white teeth. He is a very fine man whom you will marry. The queen herself has not such a black velvet fur; and his kitchen and cellar are full. Be thankful for your good fortune.'

Now the wedding was to be held. The Mole had already come to fetch Thumbelina; she was to live with him, deep under the earth, and never to come out into the warm sunshine, for that he did not like. The poor little thing was very sorrowful; she was now to say farewell to the glorious sun, which, after all, she had been allowed by the Field Mouse to see from the threshold of the door.

'Farewell, thou bright sun!' she said, and stretched out her arms towards it, and walked a little way forth from the house of the Field Mouse, for now the corn had been reaped, and only the dry stubble stood in the fields. 'Farewell!' she repeated, and threw her little arms round a little red flower which still bloomed there. 'Greet the dear Swallow from me, if you see her again.'

'Tweet-weet! tweet-weet!' a voice suddenly sounded over her head. She looked up; it was the Swallow, who was just flying by. When he saw Thumbelina he was very glad; and Thumbelina told him how loth she was to have the ugly Mole for her husband, and that she was to live deep under the earth, where the sun never shone. And she could not refrain from weeping.

'The cold winter is coming now,' said the Swallow; 'I am going to fly far away into the warm countries. Will you come with me? You can sit upon my back, only tie yourself fast with your

sash, then we shall fly from the ugly Mole and his dark room—away, far away, over the mountains, to the warm countries, where the sun shines more beautifully than here, where it is always summer, and there are lovely flowers. Only fly with me, you dear little Thumbelina, you who saved my life when I lay frozen in the dark earthy passage.'

'Yes, I will go with you!' said Thumbelina, and she seated herself on the bird's back, with her feet on his outspread wings, and bound her girdle fast to one of his strongest feathers; then the Swallow flew up into the air over forest and over sea, high up over the great mountains, where the snow always lies; and Thumbelina felt cold in the bleak air, but then she crept under the bird's warm feathers, and only put out her little head to admire all the beauties beneath her.

At last they came to the warm countries. There the sun shone far brighter than here; the sky seemed twice as high; in ditches and on the hedges grew the most beautiful blue and green grapes; lemons and oranges hung in the woods; the air was fragrant with myrtles and balsams, and on the roads the loveliest children ran about, playing with the gay butterflies. But the Swallow flew still farther, and it became more and more beautiful. Under the most glorious green trees by the blue lake stood a palace of dazzling white marble, from the olden time. Vines clustered around the lofty pillars; at the top were many swallows' nests, and in one of these the Swallow lived who carried Thumbelina.

'Here is my house,' said the Swallow. 'But if you will select for yourself one of the splendid flowers which grow down yonder, then I will put you into it, and you shall have everything as nice as you can wish.'

'That is capital,' cried she, and clapped her little hands.

A great marble pillar lay there, which had fallen to the ground and had been broken into three pieces; but between these pieces grew the most beautiful great white flowers. The Swallow flew down with Thumbelina, and set her upon one of the broad leaves. But how great was the little maid's surprise! There sat a little man in the midst of the flower, as white and transparent as if he had been made of glass; he wore the daintiest of gold crowns on his head, and the brightest wings on his shoulders; he himself was not bigger than Thumbelina. He was the angel of the flower. In each of the flowers dwelt such a little man or woman, but this one was king over them all.

'Heavens! how beautiful he is!' whispered Thumbelina to the Swallow.

The little prince was very much frightened at the Swallow; for it was quite a gigantic bird to him, who was so small. But when he saw Thumbelina, he became very glad; she was the prettiest maiden he had ever seen. Therefore he took off his golden crown, and put it upon her, asked her

name, and if she would be his wife, and then she should be queen of all the flowers. Now this was truly a different kind of man to the son of the Toad, and the Mole with the black velvet fur. She therefore said 'Yes' to the charming prince. And out of every flower came a lady or a lord, so pretty to behold that it was a delight: each one brought Thumbelina a present; but the best gift was a pair of beautiful wings which had belonged to a great white fly; these were fastened to Thumbelina's back, and now she could fly from flower to flower. Then there was much rejoicing; and the Swallow sat above them in her nest, and sung for them as well as she could; but yet in her heart she was sad, for she was so fond of Thumbelina, and would have liked never to part from her.

'You shall not be called Thumbelina!' said the Flower Angel to her; 'that is an ugly name, and you are too fair for it—we will call you Maia.'

'Farewell, farewell!' said the Swallow, and she flew away again from the warm countries, far away back to Denmark. There she had a little nest over the window of the man who can tell fairy tales. To him she sang 'Tweet-weet! tweet-weet!' and from him we have the whole story.

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