

The Snail and the Rosebush

Hans Christian Andersen

Around the garden ran a hedge of hazelnut bushes, and beyond it lay fields and meadows with cows and sheep; but in the middle of the garden stood a blooming Rosebush, and under it sat a Snail, who had a lot inside his shell - namely, himself.

"Wait till my time comes," it said. "I'll do a great deal more than grow roses; more than bear nuts; or give milk, like cows and the sheep!"

"I expect a great deal from you," said the Rosebush. "May I dare ask when this is going to happen?"

"I'll take my time," said the Snail. "You're always in such a hurry! That does not arouse expectations!"

Next year the Snail lay in almost the same spot, in the sunshine beneath the Rose Tree, which was budding and bearing roses as fresh and as new as ever. And the Snail crept halfway out of its shell, stretched out its horns and drew them back in again.

"Everything looks just as it did last year. No progress at all; the Rose Tree sticks to its roses, and that's as far as it gets."

The summer passed; the autumn came. The Rose Tree still bore buds and roses till the snow fell. The weather became raw and wet, and the Rose Tree bent down toward the ground. The Snail crept into the ground.

Then a new year began, and the roses came out again, and the Snail did, too.

"You're an old Rosebush now," the Snail said. "You must hurry up and die, because you've given the world all that's in you. Whether it has meant anything is a question that I haven't had time to think about, but this much is clear enough - you've done nothing at all for your inner development, or you would certainly have produced something else. How can you answer that? You'll soon be nothing but a stick. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

"You frighten me!" said the Rosebush. "I never thought about that at all."

"No, you have never taken the trouble to think of anything. Have you ever considered yourself, why you bloomed, and how it happens, why just in that way and in no other?"

"No," said the Rosebush. "I was just happy to blossom because I couldn't do anything else. The sun was warm and the air so refreshing. I drank of the clear dew and the strong rain; I breathed, I lived. A power rose in me from out of the earth; a strength came down from up above; I felt an increasing happiness, always new, always great, so I had to blossom over and over again. That was my life; I couldn't do anything else."

"You have led a very easy life," said the Snail.

"Certainly. Everything was given to me," said the Rosebush. "But still more was granted to you. You're one of those with a deep, thoughtful nature, one of those highly gifted minds that will astonish the world."

"I've no intention of doing anything of the sort!" said the Snail. "The world means nothing to me. What do I have to do with the world? I have enough to do with myself and within myself."

"But shouldn't all of us on earth give the best we have to others and offer whatever is in our power? Yes, I've only been able to give roses. But you? You who are so richly gifted - what have you given to the world? What do you intend to give?"

"What have I given? What do I intend to give? I spit at the world. It's no good! It has nothing to do with me. Keep giving your roses; that's all you can do! Let the hazel bush bear nuts, let the cows and sheep give milk. They each have their public; but I have mine inside myself. I retire within myself, and there I shall stay. The world means nothing to me." And so the Snail withdrew into his house and closed up the entrance behind him.

"That's so sad," said the Rose Tree. "I can't creep into myself, no matter how much I want to; I must go on bearing roses. Their petals fall off and are blown away by the wind, although once I saw one of the roses laid in a mother's hymnbook, and one of my own roses was placed on the breast of a lovely young girl, and another was kissed by a child in the first happiness of life. It did me good; it was a true blessing. Those are my recollections - my life!"

So the Rose Tree bloomed on in innocence, and the Snail loafed in his house - the world meant nothing to him.

And years rolled by.

The Snail had turned to earth in the earth, and the Rose Tree had turned to earth in the earth. Even the rose of memory in the hymnbook was withered, but in the garden new rosebushes bloomed, and new snails crept into their houses and spat at the world, for it meant nothing to them.

Shall we read this story all over again? It'll never be different.