

Thumbelina

There was once a woman who wished very much to have a little child. She went to a fairy who said, "Oh, that can be easily managed. Here is a barleycorn. Put it into a flowerpot and see what will happen."

"Thank you," said the woman. Then she went home and planted it, and there grew up a large, handsome flower. Within the flower sat a very delicate and graceful little maiden, scarcely half as long as a thumb. They gave her the name of Thumbelina.

A walnut shell, elegantly polished, served her for a cradle; her bed was formed of blue violet leaves. One night, a large, ugly, wet toad crept through the window. "What a pretty little wife this would make for my son," said the toad, and she took up the walnut shell in which Thumbelina lay asleep, and jumped through the window with it. And the old toad swam out to a water lily leaf in the stream.

The tiny creature woke and began to cry bitterly when she found where she was. The toad said, "My son will be your husband." Then the toads swam away, leaving Thumbelina all alone.

The little fishes who swam beneath lifted their heads and saw Thumbelina. "No, it must never be!" So they gnawed the green stalk and the leaf floated down the stream, carrying Thumbelina far away.

During the whole summer, poor little Thumbelina lived quite alone in the wide forest. She wove herself a bed with blades of grass and drank the honey from the flowers every morning.

So passed away the summer and the autumn, and then came the winter—the long, cold winter. She felt dreadfully cold, for her clothes were torn, and she was herself so frail and delicate that she was nearly frozen to death.

She came to the door of a field mouse, who had a little den. There dwelt the field mouse in warmth and comfort, with a whole roomful of corn, a kitchen, and a beautiful dining room. Poor Thumbelina stood before the door, just like a little beggar girl.

"You poor little creature," said the field mouse, for she was really a good old mouse, "come into my warm room and dine with me."

She was pleased with Thumbelina, so she said, "You are quite welcome to stay with me all the winter, if you like." And Thumbelina found herself very comfortable.

"We shall have a visitor soon," said the field mouse one day. "If you could only have him for a husband, you would be well provided for indeed."

Thumbelina did not feel at all interested about this neighbor, for he was a mole. However, he came and paid his visit, dressed in his black velvet coat.

Thumbelina was obliged to sing to him, "Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home," and many other pretty songs. And the mole fell in love with her because she had so sweet a voice. The mole had dug a long passage under the earth, which led from the dwelling of the field mouse to his own, and here she had permission to walk with Thumbelina whenever she liked. But he warned them not to be alarmed at the sight of a dead bird. The mole went before them through the long, dark passage.

In the middle of the floor lay a swallow—the poor bird had evidently died of the cold. It made little Thumbelina very sad to see it, she did so love the little birds. But during the night, Thumbelina got out of bed and wove a large, beautiful carpet of hay. She spread some of it on each side of the bird, so that he might lie warmly in the cold earth.

“Farewell, pretty little bird,” said she. Then she laid her head on the bird’s breast, but it seemed as if something inside the bird went “thump, thump.” It was the bird’s heart; he was not really dead. She laid the wool more thickly over the poor swallow.

The next night, she again stole out to see him. He was alive, but very weak; he could only open his eyes for a moment. “Thank you, pretty little maiden,” said the sick swallow; “I have been so nicely warmed that I shall soon regain my strength.”

She brought the swallow some water in a flower leaf, and he told her that he had wounded one of his wings in a thorn bush and could not fly as fast as the others.

All winter, Thumbelina nursed him with care and love. Very soon the springtime came. Then the swallow bade farewell to Thumbelina and asked her if she would go with him. But she knew it would grieve the field mouse, so she said, “No, I cannot.”

“Farewell, then, farewell, you good, pretty little maiden,” said the swallow, and he flew out into the sunshine.

Thumbelina looked after him, and the tears rose in her eyes. She was very fond of the poor swallow.

“You are going to be married, little one,” said the field mouse. “My neighbor has asked for you. What good fortune for a poor child like you!” But Thumbelina was not at all pleased, for she did not like the tiresome mole.

Every morning when the sun rose and every evening when it went down, she would creep out. She thought how beautiful and bright it seemed out there and wished so much to see her dear friend, the swallow, again. But he had flown far away into the lovely green forest.

When autumn arrived, the field mouse said, “In four weeks, the wedding must take place.” Then she wept and said she would not marry the disagreeable mole.

“Nonsense,” replied the field mouse. “You ought to be very thankful for such good fortune.”

So the wedding day was fixed, on which the mole was to take her away to live deep under the earth, and never again to see the warm sun because he did not like it. “Farewell, bright sun,” she cried, stretching out her arm toward it. “Greet the little swallow from me, if you should see him again.”

“Tweet, tweet,” sounded over her head suddenly. She looked up, and there was the swallow himself flying close by. She told him how unwilling she was to marry the ugly mole. And as she told him, she wept. Said the swallow, “Fly now with me, dear little one; you saved my life when I lay frozen in that dark, dreary passage.”

“Yes, I will go with you,” said Thumbelina; and she seated herself on the bird’s back, and tied her girdle to one of his strongest feathers. The swallow rose in the air and flew where the air was fragrant with myrtles and orange blossoms.

At last the swallow flew down with Thumbelina and placed her on one of the broad leaves of a beautiful white flower. But how surprised she was to see in the middle of the flower a tiny little man with a gold crown on his head, and delicate wings at his shoulders, not much larger than was she herself. He was the angel of the flower, the king of all of the flowers.

“Oh, how beautiful he is!” whispered Thumbelina to the swallow.

When he saw Thumbelina he was delighted, and asked if she would be his wife and queen over all the flowers. She said yes to the handsome prince. Then all the flowers opened, and out of each came a little lady or a tiny lord with a present; but the best gift was a pair of beautiful wings, and they fastened them to Thumbelina’s shoulders, so that she might fly from flower to flower.

Then there was much rejoicing.

“Farewell, farewell,” said the swallow, with a heavy heart, as he left the warm countries, to fly back into Denmark. There he had a nest over the window of a house in which dwelt the writer of fairy tales. The swallow sang “Tweet, tweet,” and from his song came the whole story.