

Choice Literature.

THE ROSE AND THE TOAD.

FROM THE RUSSIAN OF GARSCHINSKI.

BY THEOPHILE D'ABRI.

I.

In the long ago a rose and a toad lived near each other. The shrub on which the rose blossomed grew in a half-round parterre before a house yet occupied, though the large shady garden in front of it had been long neglected. Weeds flourished in the plat-bands, and in the paths, which were no longer cleansed or sanded. The green, wooden railing, with its carved ornaments was faded and broken. The boys had pulled off some of the bars to play soldiers, and the *moujik*s had carried some away to defend themselves against the dogs. But the parterre continued luxuriant, and around the remains of the railing twined the wild pea, the cuscute and other flowering vines, from which hung white and purple clusters. Tall thistles also sprang up in the moist, rich soil of the garden, and the still taller spires of the yellow mulien bristled with flowers. Nettles covered a large corner, and, however disagreeable in other respects, the dark verdure formed an admirable back-ground for the pale colours of the rose.

The flower commenced opening on a beautiful May morning. The dew was fast rising into vapour, but some tiny tears still hung in their purity on the edges of the rose. The flower seemed to be weeping. Around her all was so bright and sunny when for the first time she beheld the blue sky, and felt the play of the fresh breeze and the rays of the genial sun among her thin, light-tinted petals; all was so calm and peaceful in the parterre, that she might well have wept, not from sorrow, but from pure joy. She could not speak, but, inclining her little head, she could shed around her a subtle and refreshing perfume. Such were her words, her tears, her prayers.

At her feet lay a fat old toad, which had spent the night hunting worms and gnats, and at the dawn had selected a moist and shady place for repose. His eyes were covered by a membrane; his sides puffed out dirty and slimy. One of his paws was stretched before him; he was too lazy to draw it up to his body. He took no delight in the beauty of the morning. He was gorged and taking rest. When the zephyr, growing more gentle, bore less of the fragrance of the rose far away on its wings, the toad began to breathe it, and became disturbed and confused, but was too stupid to regard whence it came.

II.

Since the previous autumn no one had come near the parterre where the rose grew and the toad was reposing. The last visitor was a bright-eyed little boy of seven years, having a large head on a slender body. As no one else claimed the garden he called it his own, and it was his delight. His visits had ceased at the time when the toad was preparing to make his home for the winter among the foundation-stones of the house.

When the weather was pleasant the little fellow would sit and read on an old bench standing against the house, at the side of the only dry and sanded path, which was kept in good condition for going back and forth and closing the shutters. His sister, who took care of him, would remain at the window reading or embroidering to keep him company. Frequently when she asked: "Wassia, shall I throw out your ball so you can play?" he would answer: "No, Macha, I like my book better."

When fatigued with the "Adventures of Robinson" and the stories of wild countries, he would leave his book open and wander over the garden. Every bush and shrub was an acquaintance. He would crouch before a velvety mullein plant twice as tall as he to see a colony of ants running up and down after the aphides, and gathering with delicate tact the pure droplets of honey-dew exuding from the little rolls on the backs of the aphides. He would follow the beetles dragging their balls he knew not where. He would watch the spider when she had woven her irised web, in a sunny place, and was lying in wait for flies; and the lizard opening its mouth to drink in the sunshine, and reflecting the rays from the scales of its bright green corselet.

One evening when he saw a hedgehog for the first time, he could scarcely restrain his joy and was about to clap his hands. From fear of frightening the little prickly beast he held his breath. But he opened wide his lustrous eyes and was delighted to see how the animal sniffed with its snout for worms among the roots of the rose bush, and in what a funny way it drew them out with its plump, bear-like paws.

"Wassia, come in. It begins to be damp," called his sister.

The hedgehog heard the voice and was frightened, and rolled itself into a ball, covering its head and hind paws with its spines. The child touched the points lightly, and the animal curled up the more and began to pant like a steam engine. By degrees it became used to the child. He was so peaceful and gentle that it was no wonder the animal outgrew its fear. At last, when the little beast tasted the milk which he brought in a saucer, the joy of the youthful master of the garden was at its height.

III.

Wassia grew weaker and weaker, and when the spring returned with its sunshine and warmth he could not leave the house to amuse himself in the garden. So his sister sat near his bedside instead of the window. He could no longer hold the smallest volume, and his eyes were soon fatigued. His sister read whatever he desired, as he lay with his emaciated face resting on the pillow.

Suddenly, one day, he called "Macha!"

"What, my dear?"

"Is it nice in the garden? Have the roses blossomed?"

The sister leaned over, kissed his wasted cheeks, and brushed away a tear. "Yes, dear; it's very nice and the roses are in bloom. On Monday we'll go out together if the doctor consents."

He drew a deep sigh, and Macha resumed reading. In a few minutes he said: "I've heard enough for now. I'm tired and sleepy."

The sister arranged the pillows and coverings. He turned painfully toward the wall and was silent.

The sun shone through the window that opened on the parterre, and the bright rays fell on the bed, bathing the pillows with light, and gilding the short hair and puny neck of the child.

IV.

The rose knew nothing of all this. It was expanding every hour. The next day it would be fully open, but the day after it would begin to fade and lose its petals. That is the whole life of a rose. But in that brief existence it was to experience many fears and troubles.

The toad had perceived it. When his ugly eyes first rested on the flower his heart was touched with a strange feeling. He could not keep his face turned from those delicate petals. The rose pleased him. He felt an irresistible desire to be as near as possible to an object so beautiful and fragrant. But to express his tender sentiments he found only these words:—

"Wait! I will eat you up."

The rose trembled. Why was she fastened to the stem? The little birds were free and twittered around her, hopping from branch to branch, and at times flying far away. The butterflies, too, were free. How she envied them! Oh, that she had wings like them to escape from those mischievous eyes! She had not learned that the toad sometimes lay in wait even for butterflies.

"I will eat you up," repeated the reptile in a tone which he tried to render sweet, but which sounded only the harsher. He undertook to climb and get near the rose.

"I will eat you up," he kept saying as he gazed uneasily at the flower. The rose saw with horror the clammy, repugnant paws catching on to the twigs below her. But the toad had great trouble in climbing. His flat body was made for crawling and leaping on a smooth surface. After each fruitless effort he looked up eagerly at the branch where the flower was swaying and exerted himself anew.

The rose believed its destruction near and prayed, "Oh, that I might die some other death!"

The toad climbed higher and higher, but at the spot where the old wood ended and the young branches commenced, he met new difficulties. The smooth, green bark was armed with sharp thorns. He pricked his paws and body, and rolled down covered with blood. He now stared at the flower with venom in his heart.

"I tell you," he squeaked, "that I will yet eat you up."

Night was coming on, and it was needful to hunt for his supper. Dragging himself along he watched for imprudent insects. Anger prevented him from gorging himself as much as usual. His scratches were not dangerous, and he resolved to take a good rest and then return to the flower which had such a strange fascination, though it was now odious to him.

The next morning the rose had almost forgotten her enemy. She was approaching full bloom and was the most beautiful one in the parterre. Still there was no one to admire her. The young master was helpless on his bed. His sister did not leave him, and did not appear at the window. Only the birds and butterflies fluttered about the rose, and the buzzing bees at times plunged into the corolla for the honey, and flew away covered with the yellow dust of the flower. A nightingale perched on the bush and commenced a song which was quite unlike the hoarse croaking of the toad. The rose listened and felt happy. She thought that the bird was singing because she was there, and perhaps she was right.

She did not notice that her enemy was again slyly working his way up the branches. This time the toad did not spare his paws or sides. He mounted higher and still higher. In the midst of the sweet song of the nightingale the rose heard the dreaded croaking:—

"I told you that I'd eat you up, and I will eat you up."

In fact, clinging to the nearest twig, he was devouring her already with his eyes. One moment more, and he would be able to reach her. She felt that she was about to perish.

V.

The young master had for a long time lain motionless. The sister, seated in an arm-chair at the bedside thought that he was asleep. For several nights her wakeful eyes had watched over the sick one. Little by little the hand holding the book was relaxed, her head inclined, and she fell into a doze.

"Macha!" cried the brother.

She started up. In her dream she was sitting at the window, as the year before, and her brother was playing in the garden. When she opened her eyes and saw him stretched on the bed, thin and feeble, she sighed mournfully.

"What, my dear?"

"Macha, you told me that the roses were open. Can I have one?"

"Yes, dear, certainly."

She looked out on the parterre where the superb rose flourished in beauty and fragrance.

"Oh! There is just the one for you; a splendid rose. Shall I put it in a glass on your stand?"

"Yes; I would like it on the stand."

The young girl took her scissors and went to the garden. She had been confined to the chamber so long that she was dazzled by the sun and benumbed by the cool air. She reached the shrub just when the toad was about to spring on the flower.

"What a horror!" she exclaimed.

Seizing the branch, she shook it smartly. The toad fell heavily to the ground. Recovering himself, he leaped furiously at the young girl, but could not get much higher than the hem of her dress. She threw it to a distance with the tip of her shoe. He dared not come near again, and his envious eyes beheld the watchful care with which she removed the flower and carried it to the house.

As the brother caught sight of the rose, the first he had seen for so many months, he smiled feebly and made a painful movement to reach it.

"Let me smell it," he moaned.

The sister put the stem in his hand, and helped to bring the flower to his face; he breathed the delicious perfume, and murmured with a happy smile:—

"Oh, how good it is!"

Soon his delicate face grew dark; his heart ceased to beat, it was silent—and forever!—*Independent*.

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OF MYSELF.

This only grant me, that my means may lie
Too low for envy, for contempt too high.

Some honour I would have,
Not from great deeds, but good alone;
The unknown are better than ill-known;
Rumour can open the grave.

Acquaintance I would have, but when 't depends
Not on the number, but the choice, of friends.

Books should, not business, entertain the light,
And sleep, as undisturbed as death, the night.

My house a cottage more
Than palace; and should fitting be
For all my use, no luxury,

My garden painted o'er
With Nature's hand, not Art's; and pleasures yield,
Horace might envy in his Sabine field.

Thus would I double my life's fading space,
For he that runs it well twice runs his race.

And in this true delight,
These unbought sports, this happy state,
I would not fear, nor wish, my fate;

But boldly say each night,
To-morrow let my sun his beams display,
Or in clouds hide them; I have lived to-day.

—Abraham Cowley (1650).

CREATURES OF THE FIELDS AND WOODS.

We are by the covert side, and a strange churring comes from the glades. Waiting silently beneath the bushes, it approaches nearer and nearer, until a loud flapping is heard among the nutbush tops. The object approaches quite closely, and we can see that the noise is produced by a large bird striking its wings together as they meet behind. Even in the dark we detect that each wing is crossed by a definite white bar. Had we the bird in our hand, we should see that it seemed a connecting link between the owls and the swallows, having the soft plumage and noiseless flight of the one, and the wide mouth of the other. The noise it produces among the trees is probably to disturb from off the bushes the large-winged moths upon which it feeds. This is the nightjar or goat-sucker. The latter name it has from a superstitious notion that it sucks goats and cows, founded probably upon the fact of its wide gape. It is certain that these birds are often seen flitting about the bellies of cattle as they stand knee-deep in summer pastures. The reason of this is obvious, as there insect food is always abundant. Coming from out the woods the short, sharp bark of a fox is heard, and this is answered at intervals by the vixen. Rabbits rush across our path, or rustle through the dead leaves, their white scuts showing as vanishing points in the darkness. The many-tongued hedge-bird which tells her tale to all the reeds by day, prolongs it under the night. Singing ceaselessly from the bushes, she chatters garrulously or imitates the songs of other birds; until my old angler friends call her the "fisherman's nightingale." When by the covert side, one of the calls which one constantly hears is the crowing of cock pheasants; this is indulged in the densest darkness, as is sometimes the soft cooing of the wood-pigeons. Both pheasants and cushats sleep on the low lateral branches of tall trees, and from beneath these the poacher often shoots them. He comes when there is some moon, and with a short-barrelled gun and a half charge of powder drops the birds dead from below. One of the greatest night helps to the game-keeper in staying the depredations of the poachers is the lapwing. The bird is one of the lightest sleepers of the field, starting up from the fallows and screaming upon the slightest alarm. Poachers dread the detection of this bird, and the keeper closely follows its cry. A hare rushing past will put the plover away from its roost, and when hares act thus there is generally some good cause for it. . . . One of the most piteous sounds that is borne on the night is the hare's scream when it finds itself in the poacher's nets. It resembles nothing so nearly as the cry of a child, and when it suddenly ceases we know the wire snare has tightened round its throat. All night long crake answers crake from the meadows, appearing now at our feet, now far out yonder. Like the cuckoo, the cornrail is a bird oftener heard than seen; it is of hiding habits, and finds a secure and snug retreat in lush summer grass. Beneath the oaks bats encircle after night-flying insects, and there by the stream side are clouds of gaudy ophemere. The wild whistle of a curlew comes from high overhead as the bird flies through the night to its far-off feeding ground. In the fall of the year multitudes of migratory birds pass over; we "hear the beat of their pinions fleet," but their forms we cannot see. If only, however, we hear the cry of their voices fall in dreamily through the sky, the species is easy of identification. If we approach the reedbeds silently we may hear the hoarse croak of the frogs; or springing wild ducks as they beat the air with their strong wings. Emerging from the waterside to a belt of coppice, we are again reminded how lightly the creatures of the field and woods sleep. The faintest rustle brings chirping from the bushes, and in the densest darkness even some of the delicate wood-birds sing—not only the sedge and grasshopper-warblers, but from the willows come the lute-like mellow-ness and wild sweetness of the blackcap, another night singer.—"Nature and Woodcraft," by John Watson.