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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Butterflies

Oh, how beautiful! Oh, my goodness, how beautiful they are! There are some whose wings are barred with red on a garnet background; some bright blue with black circles; others are sulphur-yellow with orange spots; again others are white fringed with gold-color. They have on the forehead two fine horns, two antennae, sometimes fringed like an aigrette, sometimes cut off like a tuft of feathers. Under the head they have a proboscis, a sucker as fine as a hair and twisted into a spiral. When they approach a flower, they untwist the proboscis and plunge it to the bottom of the corolla to drink a drop of honeyed liquor. Oh, how beautiful they are! Oh, my goodness, how beautiful they are! But if one manages to touch them, their wings tarnish and leave between the fingers a fine dust like that of precious metals.

Now their uncle told the children the names of the butterflies that flew on the flowers in the garden. "This one," said he, "whose wings are white with a black border and three black spots, is called the cabbage butterfly. This larger one, whose yellow wings barred with black terminate in a long tail, at the base of which are found a large rust colored eye and blue spots, is called the swallow-tail. This tiny one, sky-blue above, silver-gray underneath, sprinkled with black eyes in

white circles, with a line of reddish spots bordering the wings, is called the Argus."

And Uncle Paul continued naming the butterflies that a bright sun had drawn to the flowers.



"The Argus ought to be difficult to catch," observed Emile. "He sees everywhere; his wings are covered with eyes."

"The pretty round spots that many butterflies have on their wings are not

really eyes, although they are called by that name; they are ornaments, nothing more. Real eyes, eyes for seeing, are in the head. The Argus has two, just like all the other butterflies."

"Claire tells me," said Jules, "that butterflies come from caterpillars. Is it true, Uncle?"

"Yes, my child. Every butterfly, before becoming the graceful creature which flies from flower to flower with magnificent wings, is an ugly caterpillar that creeps with effort. Thus the cabbage butterfly, which I have just shown you, is first a green caterpillar, which stays on the cabbages and gnaws the leaves. Jacques will tell you how much pains he takes to protect his cabbage patch from the voracious insect; for, you see,

caterpillars have a terrible appetite. You will soon learn the reason.

“Most insects behave like caterpillars. On coming out of the egg, they have a provisional form that they must replace later by another. They are, as it were, born twice: first imperfect, dull, voracious, ugly; then perfect, agile, abstemious, and often of an admirable richness and elegance. Under its first form, the insect is a worm called by the general name of larva.

“You remember the lion of the plant-lice, the grub that eats the lice of the rosebush and, for weeks, without being able to satisfy itself, continues night and day its ferocious feasting. Well, this grub is a larva, that will change itself into a little lace-winged fly, the hemerobius, whose wings are of gauze and eyes of gold. Before becoming the pretty red ladybird with black spots, this pretty insect, which, in spite of its innocent air, crunches the plant-lice, is a very ugly worm, a slate-colored larva, covered with little points, and itself very fond of plant-lice. The June bug, the silly June bug, which, if its leg is held by a thread, awkwardly puffs out its wings, makes all preparations, and starts out to the tune of ‘Fly, fly, fly!’ is at first a white worm, a plump larva, fat as bacon, which lives under-ground, attacks the roots of plants, and destroys our crops. The big stag-beetle, whose head is armed with menacing mandibles shaped like the stag’s horns, is at first a large worm that lives in old tree-trunks. It is the same with the capricorn, so peculiar for its long antennae. And the worm found in our ripe cherries, which is so repugnant to us, what does it become? It

becomes a beautiful fly, its wings adorned with four bands of black velvet. And so on with others.

“Well, this initial state of the insect, this worm, first form of youth, is called the larva. The wonderful change which transforms the larva into a perfect insect is called metamorphosis. Caterpillars are larvae. By metamorphosis they turn into those beautiful butterflies whose wings, decorated with the richest colors, fill us with admiration. The Argus, now so beautiful with its celestial blue wings, was first a poor hairy caterpillar; the splendid swallow-tail began by being a green caterpillar with black stripes across it and red spots on its sides. Out of these despicable vermin metamorphosis has made those delightful creatures which only the flowers can rival in elegance.

“You all know the tale of Cinderella. The sisters have left for the ball, very proud, very smart. Cinderella, her heart full, is watching the kettle. The godmother arrives. ‘Go,’ says she, ‘to the garden and get a pumpkin.’ And behold, the scooped-out pumpkin changes under the godmother’s wand, into a gilded carriage. ‘Cinderella,’ says she again, ‘open the mouse-trap.’ Six mice run out of it, and are no sooner touched by the magic wand than they turn into six beautiful dappled-gray horses. A bearded rat becomes a big coachman with a commanding mustache. Six lizards sleeping behind the watering-pot become green bedizened footmen, who immediately jump up behind the carriage. Finally the poor girl’s shabby clothes are changed to gold and silver ones sprinkled with precious stones.

Cinderella starts for the ball, in glass slippers. You, apparently, know the rest of it better than I.

These powerful godmothers for whom it is play to change mice into horses, lizards into footmen, ugly clothes into sumptuous ones, these gracious fairies who astonish you with their fabulous prodigies, what are they, my dear children, in comparison with reality, the great fairy of the good Mother Nature, who, out of a dirty worm, object of disgust, knows how to make a creature of ravishing beauty! She touches with her divine wand a miserable hairy caterpillar, an abject worm that slobbers in rotten wood, and the miracle is accomplished: the disgusting larva has turned into a beetle all shining with gold, a butterfly whose azure wings would have outshone Cinderella's fine toilette."