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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Shells

In Uncle Paul's room was a drawer full of shells of all sorts. One of his friends had collected them in his travels. Pleasant hours could be passed in looking at them. Their beautiful colors, their pleasing but sometimes odd shapes. Some were twisted like a spiral stair-case, others widened out in large horns, others opened and closed like a box. Some were ornamented with radiating ribs, knotty creases, or plates laid one on another like the slates of a roof; some bristled with points, spines, or jagged scales. Here were some smooth as eggs, sometimes white, sometimes spotted with red; others, near the rose-tinted opening, had long points resembling wide-stretched fingers. They came from all parts of the world. Some come from Africa, some from the Red Sea, others from China, India, Japan. Truly, many pleasant hours could be passed in examining them one by one, especially if Uncle Paul were to tell you about them.

One day Uncle Paul gave his nephews this pleasure: he spread before them the riches of his drawer. Jules and Claire looked at them with amazement; Emile was never tired of putting the large shells to his ear and listening to the continual hoo-hoo-hoo that escapes from their depths and seems to repeat the murmur of the sea.

"This one with the red and lace-like opening comes from India. It is called a helmet. Some are so large that

two of them would be as much as Emile could carry. In some islands they are so abundant that they are used instead of stones and are burnt in kilns to make lime."

"I would not burn them for lime," said Jules, "if I found such beautiful shells. See how red the opening is, how beautifully the edges are pleated."

"And then what a loud murmur it makes," added Emile.

"Is it true, Uncle, that it is the noise of the sea echoed by the shell?"

"I do not deny that it resembles a little the murmur of waves heard at a distance; but you must not think that the shell keeps in its folds an echo of the noise of the waves. It is simply the effect of the air going and coming through the tortuous cavity.

"This other belongs to France. It is common on the shores of the Mediterranean and belongs to the genus *cassis*."

"It goes hoo-hoo, like the helmet," Emile remarked.



"All those that are rather large and have a spiral cavity do the same.

"Here is another which, like the preceding, is found in the Mediterranean. It is the spiny mollusk.

The creature that inhabits it produces a violet glair,

from which the ancients derived, for their costly stuffs, a magnificent color called purple."

"How are shells made?" asked Claire.

"Shells are the dwellings of creatures called mollusks, the same as the spiral snail's shell is the house of the horny little animal that eats your young flowering plants."

"Then the snail's house is a shell, the same as the beautiful ones you have shown us," Jules observed.

"Yes, my child. It is in the sea that we find, in greatest number, the largest and most beautiful shells. They are called sea-shells. To these belong the helmet-shell, cassidula, and spiny mollusk. But fresh waters, that is to say streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, have them too. The smallest ditch in our country has shells of good shape but somber, earthy in color. They are called fresh-water shells."

"I have seen some in the water resembling large, pointed, spiral snails," said Jules. "They have a sort of cap to close the opening."

"They are Paludinidae."

"I remember another ditch shell," said Claire. "It is round, flat, and as large as a ten or even twenty coin piece."

"That is one of the Planorbinae. Finally, there are shells that are always found on land and for that reason are called land-shells. Such is the spiral snail."

"I have seen very pretty snails," Jules remarked, "almost as pretty as the shells in this drawer. In the woods you see yellow ones with several black bands wound round them in regular order."

“The creature we call the spiral snail—isn’t it a slug that finds an empty shell and lives in it?” asked Emile.

“No, my friend; a slug remains always a slug without becoming a snail; that is to say, it never has a shell. The snail, on the contrary, is born with a tiny shell that grows little by little as the snail grows. The empty shells you find in the country have had their inhabitants, which are now dead and turned to dust, only their houses remaining.”

“A slug and a snail without its shell are very much alike.”

“Both are mollusks. There are mollusks that do not make shells, the slug for example; others that do make them, such as the snails, the Paludinidae, and the cassididae.”

“And of what does the snail make its house?”

“Of its own substance, my little friend; it sweats the materials for its house.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you make your teeth, so white, shiny, and all in a row? From time to time a new one pushes through, without your giving it any thought. It does it by itself. These beautiful teeth are of very hard stone. Where does that stone come from? From your own substance, it is clear. Our gums sweat stone which fashions itself into teeth. So the snail’s house is built. The little creature sweats the stone that shapes itself into a graceful shell.”

“But to arrange stones one on another and make houses of them you need masons. The snail’s house is made without masons.”

“When I say it is done by itself, I do not mean that the stone has the faculty of making itself into a shell. You never see rubble piling itself unaided into a wall.

Mother Nature, willed that the stone should arrange itself in a mother-of-pearl palace to serve as a dwelling for the poor animal, brother to the slug, and it is accomplished according to her will. In like manner she told the stone to grow up into beautiful teeth from the depths of the rosy gums of little boys and girls, and it is done as she willed.”

“I begin to feel rather friendly toward the snail, the voracious animal that eats our flowers,” said Jules.

“I do not care to make you friendly with it. Let's make war on it since it ravages our gardens; it is our right; but do not let us disdain to learn from it, for it has many beautiful things to teach us.”