



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Storm

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It was very hot when Uncle Paul and Jules started out. With a burning sun, they were sure to find the caterpillars in their silk bag, where they do not fail to take refuge to shelter themselves from a light that is too glaring for them; at an earlier or later hour, the nests might be empty, and the journey a fruitless one.

His heart full of the naïve joys proper to his age, his mind preoccupied by the caterpillars and their processions, Jules walked at a good pace, forgetting heat and fatigue. He had untied his cravat and thrown his blouse back on his shoulders. A stick, cut by his uncle from the hedge, served him as a third leg.

In the meantime the crickets chirped louder than usual; frogs croaked in the ponds; flies became teasing and persistent; sometimes a breath of air all at once blew along the road and raised a whirling column of dust. Jules did not notice these signs, but his uncle did, and from time to time looked up at the sky. Masses of reddish mist in the south seemed to give him some concern. "Perhaps we shall have rain," said he; "we must hurry."

About three o'clock they were at the pine wood. Uncle Paul cut a branch bearing a magnificent nest. He had guessed right: all the caterpillars had returned to their lodging, perhaps in prevision of bad weather. Then they sat in the shade of a group of pines, to rest a little before returning. Naturally they talked about caterpillars.

"The processionaries, you told me," said Jules, "leave their nests to scatter over the pines and eat the leaves. There are, in fact, a great many branches almost reduced to sticks of dry wood. Look at that pine I am pointing at; it is half stripped of leaves, as if fire had passed over it. I like the way the processionaries travel, but I can't help pitying those fine trees that wither under the miserable caterpillar's teeth."

"If the owner of these pines understood his interests better," returned Uncle Paul, "he would, in the winter, when the caterpillars are assembled in their silk bags, have the nests collected and burn them, in order to destroy the detestable breed that will gnaw the young shoots, browse the buds, and arrest the tree's development. The harm is much greater in our orchards. Various caterpillars live in companies on our fruit trees and spin nests in the same way as the processionaries. When summer comes, the starveling vermin scatter all over the

trees, destroying leaves, buds, shoots. In a few hours the orchard is shorn and the crop is destroyed in its budding. So it is necessary to keep a careful lookout for caterpillar nests, remove them from the tree before spring, and burn them, so that nothing can escape; the future of the crop depends on it. It is fortunate that several kinds of creatures, little birds especially, come to our aid in this war to the death between man and the caterpillar; otherwise the worm, stronger than man on account of its infinite number, would ravage our crops. But we will talk of the little birds another time; the weather is threatening, we must go."

See how the reddish mist in the south, thicker and darker every moment, has become a large black cloud visibly invading the still clear part of the sky. Wind precedes it, bending the tops of the pines like a field of grain. There rises from the soil that odor of dust which the dry earth gives forth at the beginning of a storm.

"We must not think of starting now," cautioned Uncle Paul. "The storm is coming; it will be upon us in a few minutes. Let us hurry and find shelter."



Rain forms in the distance like a dim curtain extending clear across the sky. The sheet of water advances rapidly; it would beat the fastest racing horse. It is coming, it has come. Violent flashes of lightning furrow it, thunder roars in its depths.

At a clap of thunder heavier than the others Jules starts. "Let's stay here, Uncle," says the frightened child; "let us stay under this big bushy pine. It doesn't rain here under cover."

"No, my child," replies his uncle, who perceives that they are in the very heart of the storm; "let's get away from this dangerous tree."

And, taking Jules by the hand, he leads him hastily through the hail and rain. Beyond the wood Uncle Paul knows of an excavation hollowed out in the rock. They arrive there just as the storm breaks with all its force.

They had been there a quarter of an hour, silent before the solemn spectacle of the tempest, when a flash of fire, of dazzling brightness, rent the dark cloud in a zigzag line and struck a pine with a frightful detonation that had no reverberation or echo, but was so violent that one would have said the sky was falling. The fearful spectacle was over in the twinkling of an eye. Wild with terror, Jules had let himself fall on his knees, with clasped hands. He was crying and praying. His uncle's serenity was undisturbed.

“Take courage, my poor child,” said Uncle Paul as soon as the first fright had passed. “Let's embrace each other and thank God for having kept us safe. We have just escaped a great danger; the thunderbolt struck the pine under which we were going to take shelter.”

“Oh, what a scare I had, Uncle!” cried the boy. “I thought I should die of it. When you insisted on hurrying away in spite of the rain, did you know that the bolt would strike that tree?”

“No, my dear, I knew nothing about it, nor could any one know; only certain reasons made me fear the neighborhood of the big branching pine, and my intuition dictated the search for a less dangerous shelter.”

“You will tell me what made you avoid the dangerous shelter of the tree, will you not?”

“Very willingly; but when we are all together, so that each one may profit by it. No one ought to ignore the danger one runs in taking shelter under a tree during a storm.”

In the meantime the rain-cloud with its lightnings and thunders had moved on into the distance. On one side, the sun was setting radiant; on the opposite side, in the wake of the storm, the rainbow bent its immense bright arch of all colors. Uncle Paul and Jules started on their way, without forgetting the famous caterpillars' nest which might have cost them so dear.

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