

SHELL GATHERERS

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Shell Gatherers by Katharine Burrill

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KATHARINE BURRILL

**SHELL
GATHERERS**

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"EVEN AS IN A SEA VOYAGE WHEN THE SHIP IS
BROUGHT TO ANCHOR, AND YOU GO OUT TO
FETCH IN WATER, YOU MAKE A BY-WORK
OF GATHERING A FEW ROOTS AND
SHELLS BY THE WAY"



BY
KATHARINE
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SHELL GATHERERS

IN the chapter headed "The Voyage of Life", Epicurus draws for us a very beautiful picture. It is a short little chapter, hardly more than a paragraph, but very full of beauty and meaning. Every word holds a lesson, simple, true, and easy to understand. We can see the ship lying at anchor, the long strip of shell-strewn sand, the path from the shore to the well. The voyagers have been sent ashore to fetch water; they must climb the uphill road with their jars and pitchers and fill them at the well before they gather the shells lying so enticingly about their feet. Once they have full buckets they can spend their time in making a pleasant little "by-work" of gathering all the scraps of beauty and colour that fleck the yellow sands. Only they must not forget to glance from time to time at the waiting vessel; they must ever remember that, however beautiful, however valuable, however arduously sought and gathered, at the call of the Master of the Ship the roots and shells must be thrown down and left behind; unless—and this is the most exquisite thought of all—

unless "there be given wife and children instead of shells and roots"; these we may take with us to the ship. We leave the material things behind us—the shells are left beside the sea; those we love we take with us in our hearts. If we love nothing but the gaily painted shells, then indeed are we most miserable; though we may have hands full of riches, our hearts are empty: and what is worse than an empty heart?

It is distinctly comforting that the old Greek philosopher does not tell us we are only to fill the Duty-buckets and then sit with folded hands staring at the ship till called on board. No; he tells us we may make a "by-work" of gathering roots and shells. He says, in effect: There is work to do but not always work; duty comes first, but pleasure may follow; life is not to be all duty with never a vestige of amusement, never a gleam of pleasure. Poppies through the corn is possibly bad farming, but who is not grateful for the splashes of blazing crimson that deck our summer fields? Drab is a good wearing colour—it shows neither dust nor dirt; but unrelieved drab becomes monotonous. Poppies are not useful—it would not do to ruin the good grain for the sake of beauty and colour; but neither is it any advantage to root up everything that is not useful, sensible, and our plain duty. Some people

turn poor Master Duty into a regular slave-driver; he is Legree, ever after them with his big whip! They never relax, never spend a golden afternoon with My Lady Pleasure, nor a sunshiny spring morning with little Mistress Amusement, and they have no mercy on less duty-harried individuals. They draw water all the time, often so disagreeably (how their buckets creak!), that you would give anything to see them resting among the waving grass and sea-pinks, or find them interested in the pursuit of a clam! Perhaps the day comes when the work-bucket is too heavy for their tired-out fingers; they must learn lessons of idleness and patience; they have to sit beside the sea whether they like it or not, and what are they to do? None of the shells interest them—there is not one they care to gather; they have had no time to listen to the voices of the sea-birds, no time to understand “the beauty born of murmuring sound”; they have made no “by-work”. They have done their work, yes, done it at the expense of everything else; and now that they are deprived of their buckets they have nothing left. Tell them that the shore is strewn with pebbles and amber, they will tell you they see nothing but a tangle of seaweed, old boots, and dead cats! It is most extraordinary the way some people miss the amber and emphasize the cats. Even