ABALONE, ABALONE, ABALONE

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Before Mr. Abe went away I used to see him quite often at his nursery. He was a carnation grower just as I am one today. At noontime I used to go to his front porch and look at his collection of abalone shells.

They were lined up side by side against the side of his house on the front porch. I was curious as to why he bothered to collect them. It was a lot of bother polishing them. I had often seen him sit for hours on Sundays and noon hours polishing each one of the shells with the greatest of care. Of course I knew these abalone shells were pretty. When the sun strikes the insides of these shells it is something beautiful to behold. But I could not understand why he continued collecting them when the front porch was practically full.

He used to watch for me every noon hour. When I appeared he would look out of his room and bellow, "Hello, young man!"

"Hello, Abe-san," I said. "I came to see the abalone shells."

Then he came out of the house and we sat on the front porch. But he did not tell me why he collected these shells. I think I have asked him dozens of times but each time he closed his mouth and refused to answer.

"Are you going to pass this collection of abalone shells on to your children?" I said.

"No," he said. "I want my children to collect for themselves. I wouldn't give it to them."

"Why," I said. "When you die?

Mr. Abe shook his head. "No. Not even when I die," he said. "I couldn't give the children what I see in these shells. The children must go out for themselves and find their own shells."

"Why, I thought this collecting hobby of abalone shells was a simple affair," I said.

"It is simple. Very simple," he said. But he would not tell me further.

For several years I went steadily to his front porch and looked at the beautiful shells. His collection was getting larger and larger. Mr. Abe sat and talked to me and on each occasion his hands were busy polishing shells.

"So you are still curious?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

One day while I was hauling the old soil from the benches and replacing it with new soil I found an abalone shell half buried in the dust between the benches. So I stopped working. I dropped my wheelbarrow and went to the faucet and washed the abalone shell with soap and water. I had a hard time taking the grime off the surface.

After forty minutes of cleaning and polishing the old shell it became interesting. I began polishing both the outside and the inside of the shell. I found after many minutes of polishing I could not do very much with the exterior side. It had scabs of the sea which would not come off by scrubbing and the surface itself was rough and hard. And in the crevices the grime stuck so that even with a needle it did not become clean.

But on the other side, the inside of the shell, the more I polished the more luster I found. It had me going. There were colors which I had not seen in the abalone shells before or anywhere else. The different hues were running berserk in all directions, coming together in harmony. I guess I could say they were not unlike a rainbow which men once symbolized. As soon as I thought of this I thought of Mr. Abe.
I remember running to his place, looking for him. "Abe-san!" I said when I found
him. "I know why you are collecting the abalone shells!"
He was watering the carnation plants in the greenhouse. He stopped watering
and came over to where I stood. He looked me over closely for awhile and then his face
beamed.
"All right," he said. "Do not say anything. Nothing, mind you. When you have
found the reason why you must collect and preserve them, you do not have to say
anything more."
"I want you to see it, Abe-san," I said.
"All right. Tonight," he said. "Where did you find it?"
"In my old greenhouse, half buried in the dust," I said.
He chuckled. "That is pretty far from the ocean," he said, "but pretty close to
you."
At each noon hour I carried my abalone shell and went over to Mr. Abe's front
porch. While I waited for his appearance I kept myself busy polishing the inside of the
shell with a rag.
One day I said, "Abe-san, now I have three shells."
"Good!" he said. "Keep it up!"
I have to keep them all," I said. "They are very much alike and very much
different."
"Well! Well!" he said and smiled,
That was the last I saw of Abe-san. Before the month was over he sold his
nursery and went back to Japan. He brought his collection along and thereafter I had no
one to talk to at the noon hour. This was before I discovered the fourth abalone shell,
and I should like to see Abe-san someday and watch his eyes roll as he studies me
whose face is now akin to the collectors of shells or otherwise.