

The Hunt for Music

By Elsie Locke

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Every morning before she went to school, Jenny played on her recorder. On this day she could not find it anywhere. She looked for it in her bedroom, in the sun-porch and in the kitchen, without any luck at all.

"Sit down quietly and try to remember where you were playing it last evening," said her mother.

Jenny sat down and thought. A moment later she jumped up, shouting "I know!" and ran outside. Yes, there it was, lying on the lawn close by the rose tree in its round bed of pink and yellow daisies.

She took it inside, dried it carefully, warmed it and began to play.

"Oh dear, what can the matter be - -" sang the tune.

"It sounds funny," she said.

"Play it again," said her mother.

Jenny played the tune right through.

"It certainly does sound funny." Her mother took the recorder and looked it over. "Leaving it out all night wasn't a good idea, was it? But I can't see anything specially wrong. It may be damp inside. You should keep trying."

Jenny blew into the recorder again. This time, no sound came at all.

"It won't play! It won't play!"

"Something must be blocking it."

Jenny looked. Yes! Something was filling up the slot in the front - something grey and wriggling.

"Ugh!" she gasped. "It's a worm -or a slug - I don't want to touch it!"

Her mother laughed. "We must get it out without squashing it, whatever it is. Let me try."

She took a piece of cardboard, cut a thin strip and slid it gently down. The wriggle disappeared. She waited. At the lower end of the recorder a tiny head came first, then a tiny tail. The head waved round in a nervous sort of way.

"There!" said Mother, "it was only a baby snail. I'll take him outside."

She went to the front door and shook the recorder so that the snail fell out onto the lawn, quite near to the rose bush with its round bed of pink and yellow daisies. Jenny put the recorder in her case ready for school, promising that never again would she leave it out all night.

But she and her mother did not know that somebody else would remember what happened that morning.

Under the rosebush, Mrs Snail moved slowly round, swaying from side to side. She had lost her little Solomon.

As she crept, she whispered as loudly as she could: "Solomon! Where are you, Solomon? Now Sally, now Susie, stay where you are and don't you get lost!"

To her joy, just when the sun sent long yellow rays to melt the dew between the leaves, she saw Solomon coming.

"Wherever have you been?" she whispered angrily.

"Oh. Mummy, such an adventure! Wait till I tell my sisters, they'll be jealous!" He crawled past her into their cosy corner beneath the daisy leaves.

"An adventure? Tell us the adventure!" begged Sally and Susie.

"I made music!" said Solomon proudly.

"Music? Whatever's that?"

"It was like the thrush singing on the tree," answered Solomon in a dreamy sort of way.

"The thrush! Our enemy! How can you want to be like him!" said Mrs Snail. "He sings to warm up his beak before he goes hunting us snails."

"But Mummy, mine wasn't hungry music. It was sweet and lovely! A gliding sort of tune that a snail could dance to!"

"Tunes! Dancing! What is the child talking about!" grumbled Mrs Snail.

"It went like this - -"

Solomon opened his mouth to sing. But no sound came at all.

"How could you sing? Your voice is only a whisper, like ours," scoffed Sally.

"I don't know how," said Solomon sadly, "but I did, I know I did, because I heard myself. You see, last night when the dew was falling I crept into a round wooden tunnel. In the morning when I was going to come out, the tunnel began to fly --"

"First he sings and then he flies! What next!" said Mrs Snail.

Solomon took no notice. "I moved up the tunnel in case I fell out, and soon singing noises came to me. Like this - -"

Again he tried, but the singing noises would not come.

"I can only do it in the tunnel," he said sadly.

"Well, where is this tunnel?" asked Susie.

"I don't know," whispered Solomon. "It flew again and I fell out of it."

He went to hide himself behind the daisies, because nobody would believe him. While he was there, he listened in his head for the tune that would not come. Where was his voice? Why had he lost it after he had found it?

"Solomon," called Mrs Snail, "we are going to feed. If you want to sulk, don't bother to come. There'll be all the more juicy leaves for us."

Solomon did not answer. He waited until they were gone and then he moved off slowly in the other direction, into the grass.

The sun was now shining strongly. He could hear the cicadas on the wall. One of them stopped his whirring noise and flew down onto a stick right in front of Solomon. The little snail stopped.

"Mr Cicada," he whispered, "how do you make your music, Where is your beautiful voice, please?"

"You admire it, do you?" asked the cicada importantly.

"Oh yes! And I'm very musical myself."

"Are you indeed?" The cicada sounded unbelieving. "Well then, I make my music with a drum inside my body. Watch! Listen!"

He set up a tremendous whirr that left Solomon nearly deafened.

"How do you like that? You can't make such music," said the cicada, and he spread his wings and flew away.

Solomon gazed after him mournfully. He couldn't make music that way; he had no drum inside his body, he was sure about that. He crept sadly on through the grass.

There was a patch of white clover ahead, and as Solomon came near he heard a deep droning, and saw a brown and gold shape alighting on a flower.

"Mrs Bee!" he called in a friendly way.

At first she did not hear him for the sound of her own buzzing; but she saw him when she stopped for honey.

"Good morning, little snail, and how is your mother today?" she asked politely.

"Quite well, thank you. Tell me, Mrs Bee, how do you make your music?"

"Fancy you asking that! I thought snails weren't interested in music." The buzzing turned to a sort of good-natured laugh. "Why, it's my wings vibrating."

"Vibrating! What does that mean?"

"Moving very fast. Can't you see?"

Solomon couldn't see at all. She went much too quickly while she did it, and besides, she was hovering above him. With all the noise she could not hear his questions any more; and she did not even wait to hear them. Well, thought Solomon, it doesn't matter. I haven't any wings to vibrate.

"What's the trouble?" clicked a voice behind him.

Solomon slowly circled. There on a dry stalk stood a grasshopper.

"How loudly you speak!" said the snail in his usual whisper.

"Oh! I enjoy hearing myself!" The grasshopper began beating a tuneful rhythm.

"I didn't know you had such a voice," said Solomon. "Where does it come from?"

"I rub my hind legs against my wing cases. It's a way of showing I'm happy. Then I leap for joy."

And to prove it, the grasshopper gave a mighty leap and was gone.

"Well, I haven't got hind legs, or wing cases either," Solomon sighed to himself.

Just then a huge grey thing came speeding along so fast that the grass-stalks bent right over as he went by. Solomon drew back into his shell, and even then the thing tripped over him.

"Oh, so sorry!" it said in a high squeaky sing-song. Solomon poked his head out. It was a mouse. "It's just as well I carry my house with me," complained Solomon. "You should have watched where you were going And by the way, how do you make that singing? Where do you keep your voice?"

"In my throat," said the mouse, very surprised. "It squeaks when the air comes out between my teeth." He squeaked very loudly to show how it was done. Then he remembered something.

"I'm not supposed to squeak except when I'm inside the walls! Oh dear, oh dear, some horrid bird or cat will hear, and I'll be done for! Goodbye! Goodbye!" He sprinted off.

Solomon curled himself back in his shell and thought for a long time. Of course he couldn't puff air out between his teeth, because he hadn't any teeth. And if he could the birds would know that he was there!

Why, how dangerous it could be, this music! It wasn't so bad for the cicada - he could fly away; or the bee - she could sting; or the grasshopper - he could leap; or the mouse - he could run. But a snail could only hide, and he couldn't even do that in a hurry. A snail who made music would not live long enough to boast about it.

With this discovery, Solomon felt quite cheered. He put out his head and his tail, and set out for the daisy bed. Grass wasn't nice to eat, and he was hungry. There was no one about among the daisies, so he went further, to the pansy border; and yes, there were his mother, and Sally, and Susie, all too busily munching to give him more than a nod. Solomon found a leaf of his own and joined in the meal.

"Where have you been this time?" asked Mrs Snail at last. "Away looking for your musical voice?"

Sally and Susie laughed; Solomon shook his head wisely.

"I've been away to learn why snails don't have voices," he whispered. "I think perhaps it was the tunnel that made the music, and not me at all. I don't want to sing any more. I only want to reach that beautiful purple pansy to top off my meal."

"You shouldn't have gone into that tunnel," said Susie.

"Oh, I'm glad that I did!" Solomon made the nearest thing to a smile that a snail can manage. "It was lovely to be there, just once, with music all around me. Ah! Music! There's an adventure for you!"

He nodded his silent head, and reached out for a delicious bite of the purple pansy.