



THE STRANDLOPER

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SEASHELLS - THEIR FASCINATION THROUGH THE AGES

by R. Ruben

Conus geographus, sometimes called the "Mamba of the Sea", is a sea shell as venomous as its descriptive common name implies. It has killed man.

Many holiday "beachcombers", fascinated by the infinite variety of shape and colour of seashells, are blissfully unaware of the danger of casually picking up that pretty five inch reddish-brown gem of the seas. The "Geographus", found on the Natal coastline, that of Mocambique and East Africa, where it is common, is a member of the Cone family. The most famous member of this family is Conus gloriamaris or the "Glory-of-the Seas Cone" which although not the rarest of seashells is nevertheless priced at approximately R400.

Cone shells are equipped with a barb not unlike a harpoon with which they paralyse their prey or their enemies, for the toxin is so potent that, as has already been mentioned it is able to kill human beings.

Lest the reader be so intimidated by what he has just read, let me hasten to add that of the approximately 80,000 known species of sea shells very few need worry the collector. Do not, therefore, let these few words of warning stifle in you the wonder and fascination that the amazing world of shells has had for man ever since his evolution.

Molluscs, as seashells are called by Conchologists, have existed for more than four hundred million years. They have been found beyond the snowline of the Himalayas, in piping hot waters of thermal springs, in the solid ice of frozen ponds, in the dry wastes of deserts, and in the sea's great depths where the pressure is often tons per square inch. They have made their way onto every continent. In fact they survive in just about every kind of environment.

Throughout recorded history seashells have played a significant part in man's development. From early times cowries have been used as coinage, and the Cypraea moneta, popularly known as the "Money Cowrie", has been a favourite method of barter by African tribes, including those of South Africa. They are found in abundance on the East African shores. So well established was this cowrie as currency that the first oval metal coin minted in 670 B.C. by the Greek Colony of Lydia, was modelled after it.

Their beauty of colour and exquisite variety of design found favour among African maidens who believed that their charm would help ensnare the men of their choice. Men of the tribe ascribed other capabilities to the humble shell. Believing that a ritual dance whilst draped with the ornamental chains of cowries would make the spirits produce rain and a plentiful crop.

Shells have since primitive times been used for jewellery and ornamentation, and in our modern age are still used to create works of art. Exquisitely sculptured shell figurines may be seen in the Albany Museum, Kingwilliamstown, and the South African Medical Museum. They are the work of the late Dr. S. Cohen.

An innocuous three inch shell, Murex brandaris was held in high esteem by the emperors and kings of the Phoenician era. It provided them with the purple dye for their robes. The yellowish fluid secreted by M.brandaris when alarmed was found to be the ingredient that would produce this rich colour. So rare was it, and so expensive that only royalty could afford to wear cloth of this hue. Expressions such as "born to the purple" stem from this discovery of the dyers of Tyre. Previously the closest colour to purple was a soft mauve produced from herbs and tree barks.

The symmetry and architectural perfection of sea shells attracted the attention of artists. Leonardo da Vinci studied nature's capable builders minutely, and made drawings utilising the construction of a mollusc for the design of a spiral staircase in the Chateau of Blois in France. Sandro Botticelli's famous painting "The Birth of Venus" depicts Venus emerging from a scallop shell. He has depicted a slightly distorted shell, possibly for the sake of composition. Rembrandt too was moved by the humble sea shell, sufficiently to paint "The Shell" - Conus marmoreus - which today can be seen in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Holland.

Musical instruments have, from earliest times, been made out of shells, the Triton shell in particular. A painting by Peter Paul Rubens, "Maria de Medici landing in Marseilles", clearly depicts a shell as a musical instrument. In Japan, even today, Shinto priests call the faithful to service by blowing an eerie note through a Charonia tritonis.

The Golden Cowrie, Cypraea aurantium, a shell eagerly sought by collectors was until recent times the royal symbol worn by Melanesian chiefs who believed that on death their souls took up residence in it. Most of these shells are found on the treacherous coral reefs of the Fiji Islands.

The first materials used by Italian craftsmen to fashion cameos were the shell Cypraecassis rufa. Unfortunately this has now become a dying art. This three to six inch light brown shell with a shiny red mouth and black stripes is a favourite of both the general public and the collector because of its beauty of colour. They are a favourite food of many of African tribes.

For sheer size and weight the bivalve Tridacna gigas - The Giant Clam - has no peer the record size being 137 cm.

The effect on Oriental culture by the Murex shell is evident to any who have travelled to the east. Murex cornucervi must surely have been the shell that inspired the design of the headdress worn by the Balinese dancers. Architecturally Latiaxis lischkeanus, a pure white shell with the delicacy of spun sugar, is so similar to the Temples of Cambodia that one realises that it must have been the five hundred million years of inspired design created by the "little architects" living in these shells that were the real geniuses behind the creation of the temples.

These beautiful sea shells nevertheless have an ugly cousin, despised by nearly all mankind and found in great abundance in the most undesired of places - your garden. Yes, I am referring to the snail, that is the pest of all gardeners. Who would believe that the garden snail and the sea shell are members of the same phylum. One the Cinderella, the other the coveted princely possession of eager collectors. So next time you see the humble snail crawling amongst your finest blooms, and as you descend on him with murderous intent, spare a thought, after all he was here long before you or I.

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THE SHELLERS

by the Skipper

These shellers are a crazy mob, as crazy as cocked hats,
After living with them for a week I'm quite convinced of that,
When going ashore they're fully armed with all their tools of
trade,

The poor old reef is subjected to a darned commando raid!
But seeing is believing, and I'll soon learn no doubt,
Just how to find these shells and things they rave so much about.
They all wear good thick sandshoes, for the coral reef is tough,
But even after dark sets in they've never had enough,
For then they go out there with lights, creeping round the sand,
The lights held up above their heads, digging forks in hand.
It's just the same in daylight when you see them acting queer,
It's down upon their hands and knees hoping to see a crack appear.
For the poor old shell, just let him move and he leaves a mark
behind,

But that is all these shellers need to make another find.
Sometime it's just a minute crack, with a little lump below,
But you should see them dig him out with one sharp, sudden blow.
They run around with their buckets all ready for lovely loot,
You can see them swell up full of pride when they've found a good
volute.

They take it in good humour when the reef they're on is bare.
They always have that old excuse, "The shells just can't be there",
But when they have a real good day it's an interesting sight,
To see them comparing shells, and names for hours into the night.
They tell me that I'll catch the bug but they're due for a big
surprise,

To go out chasing those silly shells, why I think I'm far too wise,
But I'm eyeing off a bucket and I'm making up a fork,
I can always use the old excuse, I'm going for a walk.
For the bucket's to get water and the fork is there I'll say,
Just in case I see a snake, to chase the brute away,
But somehow they won't believe me, they're not such big fools,
For we are just about to anchor. Quick! where's my reefing tools?

Maybe this poem should be titled "As Others See Us". The author is not a shell collector, he was just unfortunate (?) enough to spend three weeks on a small boat with six ardent collectors.

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Exchanges Wanted:

Mr L.B. Pistone, "Casa Eva", Kent Ridge, Christ Church, Barbados, West Indies. Is interested in exchanging West Indian shells for South African shells. Requests airmail as surface mail takes too long.

Changes of Address:

Sr Miriam Cusack, Sint Paulusklooster, Boekenhoutstraat 23, Brummeria, Pretoria, 0002.

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Around the Groups

Transvaal Group, Johannesburg. Our meeting of 1st February marked the end of an era. Since the inception of the Group in March 1968 we have held regular meetings at Shell House. During this period the caretaker, Mr Bornman, and Mrs Bornman have voluntarily seen to our needs - operating the projector, providing tea and generally making us comfortable. Now Mr Bornman has retired and the Public Relations Officer at Shell House, Mr Hofmeyr, has informed us (and other societies) that the theatre will no longer be available for evening meetings since the new caretaker is not prepared to undertake these extra tasks.

At this our last meeting at Shell House, Dr van Hoepen thanked Mr and Mrs Bornman for their kindnesses and for the interest which they had shown in the Society. He wished them every happiness in their retirement. All this was heartily endorsed by those present. Dr van Hoepen, Mr Ruben and Mr Adam jointly made a presentation to Mr Bornman and Mrs Adam presented a bouquet of flowers to Mrs Bornman. We shall miss them, and we shall miss the friendly atmosphere of Shell House.

Members will be notified as soon as a suitable venue for our meetings have been decided upon.

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Natal Midlands Group, Pietermaritzburg. At our first meeting this year Mr Kilburn gave a most interesting discussion on the bivalves Isognononidae, Pleriidae and Pinnidae - the characteristics and biology. Several specimens of each was handed around for us to see.

Though we had four absentees, the meeting was well attended and a welcome was extended to Mr and Mrs Lafferty as prospective members. Mrs Webber was congratulated on "The Bargain of the Year" when she showed members her fine Conus milne-edwardsi which she had bought as a scruffy looking specimen for R1,50 in Durban.

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Border Group, East London. Our last meeting commenced with a welcome to all members and visitors, a special welcome being extended to Mrs Karen Newcombe, from Florida, U.S.A. and her small son. Mrs Latigan showed a most beautiful and interesting set of slides taken under water on reefs around our own vicinity, as well as shots from other parts. Particularly intriguing were close-ups of seaweeds, anemones and starfish. Mrs Newcombe gave a talk on her experiences along the beaches of Florida, but as her own collection has not yet arrived in this country, she was unable to

illustrate her talk. We hope for this pleasure in the not-too-distant future.

Whilst tea was being served, a visitor, Mrs Koch, gave a short talk on combating pollution. There was a small display of a very large almost perfect specimen of Charonia lampas pustulata from Shelly Beach for comparison with a particularly good specimen trawled deep sea off Durban. The two shells showed several diverse features in general structure, and Charonia lampas lampas trawled off Zululand. These shells are in Miss Eva's collection. She also showed members a specimen of Eudolium pyriforme, trawled off Zululand, and two small specimens of what appeared at first glance to be Phalium labiata zeylanica, but with a row of "teeth" inside the lip. Both shells were trawled off Durban in very deep water (approx. 200 fathoms).

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Eastern Cape Group, Port Elizabeth. The Vice-Chairman of the Group, Mrs Farrell opened the meeting and welcomed all those present. Mr Greave reported on a visit he paid to Cape Town where he saw Mrs Connolly and Mr & Mrs Carlsson. He showed some small plastic bags that the Society were selling in Cape Town at one cent each. Interest was shown in these bags and the Secretary was requested to try to place an order. A letter from the Stall-letting Committee of the 1974 Hobbies Fair has been received. The Group was invited to participate in the Fair which is to be held in July. It was decided that a letter be written to this Committee advising that the Group intended to provide a display.

Mr Stobbs then gave a short talk on his recent trip to Mocambique where he went as a member of a party from Rhodes University which had been asked to investigate and advise the Mocambique Government with the declaration of Marine Parks and reserves. Mr Stobbs showed a few shells he had been able to collect whilst in Mocambique.

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Minutes of a Meeting of the Society held on 26th February, 1974.

The Chairman welcomed those present with a special word of welcome to Dr Branch, our guest speaker for the evening. Apologies were recorded from four members.

The Minutes of the previous meeting, as published in The Strandloper No. 159, were taken as read and adopted. There were no matters arising from those minutes.

Mr Freeman read a cutting from Die Burger of 22nd December, 1973 to the effect that "Sea Shells of Southern Africa" by B. Kensley had been awarded a prize in Spain.

Member's attention was drawn to a new book "All Colour Book of Sea Shells" by J.M. Clayton published by Octopus Books. The author had succeeded in presenting scientific information in laymans terms. This publication costs R2,25 and was obtainable at most book shops.

There being no further business the meeting was handed over to Dr G. Branch of the Zoological Department, University of Cape Town. Dr Branch delivered a very interesting and informative talk, illustrated with graphs, on the reproduction and survival traits of the Patellidae.

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, 26th March in the Lecture Hall of the South African Museum at 8.15 p.m. The shells for display and discussion will be the Strombidae as illustrated on pages 116 to 117 of "Sea Shells of Southern Africa". A film will be screened.

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THE CONCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

(Founded 1958)

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All enquiries should be addressed to The Secretary, The Conchological Society of Southern Africa, P.O. Box 98 Howard Place, Cape, South Africa.

Entrance Fee is R1-00, with a yearly subscription of R2-50. The financial year runs from 1st July to 30th June, and members joining after December need only pay one half of the annual subscription to ensure membership to the 30th June of that year.

Members who are full - time students at an Educational Institution in South Africa may join as Student Members on payment of an annual subscription of R1-00. No Entrance Fee is payable in respect of Student Membership.

The Society's Bulletin is published monthly and is issued free to members.

The Conchological Society of Southern Africa has active groups in the following areas:-

Cape Town: Secretary, Mrs R.O. Carlsson, P.O. Box 98, Howard Place. Tel. 53-1536

Port Elizabeth: Secretary, Mr. F. Greave, P.O. Box 2054, Port Elizabeth. Tel. 45744

East London: Chairman, Mrs. M.J. Latigan, 29 Kennington Road, Nahoon. Tel. (Mornings only) 22623.

Durban: Secretary, Mrs M. Smith, 6 Retief Place, Carrington Heights. Tel. 816335

Pietermaritzburg: Secretary, Mrs G. Webber, 242, King Edward Ave., Scottsville. Tel. 52925

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