

How a Poor Boy Became a Great Scientist

by Archer Wallace

Just a few days before Christmas, in 1823, a little boy was born in the French village of Saint Leons. His parents were very poor, and the young boy, whose name was Jean Henri Fabre, was sent to live with his grandparents, who tilled a small farm some miles away. There he lived until he was seven, and made friends with the calves, the sheep, the geese and the hens, who were almost his sole companions.

His grandparents had no education. They had never opened a book in their lives. They had lived all their lives in that lonely farmhouse, and they knew little, and cared less, about the outside world. The grandfather was a stern old man, with his serious face, and unclipped hair, which he generally brought behind his ears with a flick of his thumb. He wore curious breeches, buckled at the knees, and heavy wooden shoes stuffed with straw. Young Henri was devoted to his old grandmother, who, while she could not read, told the little fellow many a thrilling story.

When meal time came all the members of the family, big and little, sat round the table, which consisted of long planks laid over two benches. At one end of the table would be a huge loaf of rye bread, which only the grandfather was allowed to cut. The grandmother generally attended to the bacon and turnips, which formed the staple food. Sometimes, on special occasions, there would be a good supply of homemade cheese. There were no proper beds in the little home, but as Henri was the youngest, he was given a sack, stuffed with oat-chaff, upon which to sleep.

In spite of the poverty of his surroundings, Henri was not unhappy. He was too young to worry much about his appearance. It is true that his clothes were rough and shabby. He generally wore a rough frieze frock which flapped against his bare legs, but his hardships were forgotten in his great love for the animals around that little farm. He loved the flowers, but even more he loved the living things all around him. Butterflies, grasshoppers, bees, spiders, wasps, in fact, every living thing the boy watched, and, when in the evening the family sat around the rough table to eat, Henri told them of his love for all these creatures. The other members of the family just laughed at Henri. How little they thought that some day Henri would know more about these insects than any one else in the world. When he was seven the time came for him to go to school, so he returned to his father's house in Saint Leons. The school he attended, which was the schoolmaster's home, consisted of one room, which had to serve as school, kitchen, bedroom, dining-room, and, sometimes, chicken-house and piggery. The schoolmaster himself was not a man of much learning, and seemed more interested in his chickens and pigs than in anything else, but he managed to teach the pupils their letters and some elementary subjects. Often in the middle of a lesson the door would be burst open, and a dozen hungry little pigs would scamper in, followed by a brood of chickens. By the time they had been put out the schoolmaster would have considerable difficulty in getting his scholars' attention back to the lesson. It was a noisy school indeed. All the boys loved the arithmetic lesson because it gave them a chance to shout. The whole class would recite the multiplication table in unison, and they would simply yell until even the little pigs became scared, and bolted out of the school.

Just about this time something happened which had a great influence over Henri Fabre. As a reward for doing well at school he was given a prize—a book about animals, with scores of pictures in it. True, it was only a cheap edition, with paper covers, but to Henri it seemed priceless. How he pored over its contents, and looked at the pictures of coons, foxes, wolves, dogs, cats, asses, rabbits, and

dozens of other animals! This served to kindle his love for living things, and when the schoolmaster told the boys to go into his garden and kill the insects Henri crammed them into his pockets. Snails, beetles, and even wasps, all seemed to him too interesting to be ruthlessly killed.

When Henri was ten his parents moved from Saint Leons to the town of Rodez. There he attended a school where he was granted free tuition for rendering certain services in the chapel. Attired in a surplice, red skull-cap, and cassock, he, together with three other boys, performed his services in the chapel, and received instruction of a much more advanced character than he had yet received. Some of the studies he found difficult, and if he had listened to the call of the woods, he would often have played truant, for he was much more interested in the living things he found there than in the dry subjects learned in the school. But he remembered his poor parents at home, and their anxiety to see him make progress, so he stuck to even the most difficult tasks, and his record there was a good one.

Soon after this misfortune visited his family, and Henri had to leave school, and for some considerable time he suffered many hardships. He often went without food, and wandered along the highroads, selling lemons at country fairs, and later working at the building of a railway. Just at that time he was fortunate in winning a bursary for the normal school at Avignon, and so ended a period of his life which had been exceedingly dark.

During the years he spent at Avignon he pursued his studies with earnest purpose, and acquitted himself with distinction. He gained his college diploma, and was appointed to teach in a school at Carpentras, and after some years of close study he was made Professor of Physics and Chemistry at Ajaccio.

During these years Henri Fabre's interest in insects had been steadily increasing. Little creatures that other people thought ugly, he studied and loved. One day a naturalist, who had been attracted to Fabre, was explaining some things to him of unusual interest. Suddenly the naturalist took a pair of scissors and burst open a shell, and then explained to Fabre the anatomy of a snail. That incident opened a new world for Fabre. His interest in insects, which had always been great, became extraordinary. No longer was he content to study the outward form of insects, but he dissected and thoroughly examined all that came within his range. Often late at night, or again early in the morning, when other people were in their beds, he searched the country lanes and pools for specimens of insects, and then studied them closely to find out their habits of life.

Soon Henri Fabre became recognized as one who understood insect life as well, if not better, than any other living person. This is not to be wondered at, for an insect, which to other people, meant nothing, was a subject of great interest to him. If he were walking along the highway and an insect appeared, he would leave another man to follow it and study its movements, and he was quite indifferent as to what people thought of him. One day, when in his home, an unusually interesting wasp appeared; he dropped what he was doing and watched its movements for hours, utterly forgetting everything else.

Although so well known and respected as a great scientist, Henri Fabre was still poor. His income did not amount to much more than three hundred dollars a year. Then he was made a member of the Legion of Honour, one of the greatest distinctions which could be awarded to any man. He was introduced to the Emperor of France, and soon the French people everywhere began to look upon him with great pride. In spite of his great fame, he was a comparatively poor man, but his habits of life were simple, and he did not long for fame. He was supremely happy when left alone to study the tiny creatures of the insect world.

In 1879, Fabre retired from the college at Avignon to Serignan. There, more than ever, he had time to follow the bent of his life, and then he began to publish his famous books about insects, which are so fascinating. One after another, his books were printed, and all over the world people began to look upon these books as works of authority. He wrote: "The Life of the Spider", "The Life of the Fly", "The Life of the Caterpillar", "The Life of the Grasshopper", "The Life of the Weevil", "The Glow-worm and other Beetles", and a great many other books upon subjects of which very few people knew much.

The methods of his research were very simple—a magnifying-glass, two scalpels, made by himself from needles, a saucer for his dissecting trough, empty match-boxes and sardine tins for his specimen cases, a few wires under which he could imprison insects and watch them—these were about the only things he needed. He had extraordinary patience, and he loved with great tenderness the creatures whose habits he studied.

Fabre lived to be ninety-two years of age. He died in 1915, while the Great War was raging. Before his death his real genius was recognized all over the world. The foremost scientific societies of England, Sweden, Belgium, Russia and other lands hastened to confer honorary titles upon him, and while he himself was so simple and modest that he cared little for fame, the honours conferred showed how highly he was esteemed. From being a very poor boy, Henri Fabre became one of the greatest scientists that ever lived.

Source:

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