

The Bay of Olvies

Gerald Durrell

It was in this bay that I caught my first spider crab. I would have walked right past him thinking him to be a weed-covered rock, if he had not made an incautious movement. His body was about the size and shape of a small flattened pear and at the pointed end it was decorated with a series of spikes, ending in two horn-like protuberances over his eyes. His legs and pincers were long, slender and spindly. But the thing that intrigued me most was the fact that he was wearing, on his back and on his legs, a complete suit of tiny sea-weeds, which appeared to be growing out of his shell.

Enchanted by this weird creature, I carried him triumphantly along the beach to my rock pool and placed him in it.

The firm grip with which I had had to hold him, had rubbed off quite a lot of his seaweed suit by the time I got him to the pool.

I placed him in the shallow, clear water and, lying on my stomach, watched him to see what he would do.

Standing high on his toes, like a spider in a hurry, he scuttled a foot or so away from where I had put him and then froze.

He sat like this for a long time, so long in fact that I was just deciding that he was going to remain immobile for the rest of the morning, recovering from the shock of capture, when he suddenly extended a long, delicate claw and very daintily, almost shyly, plucked a tiny piece of sea-weed which was growing on a nearby rock.

He put the seaweed to his mouth and I could see him mumbling at it.

At first I thought he was eating it, but soon realized that I was mistaken for, with an angular grace, he placed his claw over his back, felt around in a rather fumbling sort of way, and then planted the tiny piece of weed on his carapace.

I presumed that he had been making the base of the weed sticky with saliva or some similar substance to make it adhere to his back.

As I watched him, he trundled slowly round the pool collecting a variety of seaweed with the assiduous dedication of a professional botanist in a hitherto unexplored jungle. Within an hour or so his back was covered with such a thick layer of growth that, if he sat still and I took my eyes off him for a moment, I had difficulty in knowing exactly where he was.

Intrigued by this cunning form of camouflage, I searched the bay carefully until I found another spider crab.

For him I built a special small pool with a sandy floor, completely devoid of weed. I put him in and he settled down quite happily.

The following day I returned, carrying with me a nail brush (which turned out to be Larry's) and, taking the unfortunate spider crab, scrubbed him vigorously until not an atom of weed remained on his back or legs.

Then I dropped into his pool a variety of things; a number of tiny top shells and some broken fragments of coral, some small sea anemones and some minute bits of bottle glass that had been sand-papered by the sea so that they looked like misty jewels. Then I sat down to watch.

The crab, when returned to his pool, sat quite still for several minutes, obviously recovering from the indignity of the scrubbing I had given him.

Then, as if he could not quite believe the terrible fate that had overtaken him, he put his two pincers over his head and felt his back with the utmost delicacy, presumably hoping against hope that at least one frond of seaweed remained. But I had done my task well and his back was shining and bare.

He walked a few paces tentatively and then squatted down and sulked for half an hour.

Then he roused himself out of his gloom, walked over to the edge of the pond and tried to wedge himself under a dark ridge of rock.

There he sat brooding miserably over his lack of camouflage until it was time for me to go home.

I returned very early the following morning and, to my delight, saw that the crab had been busy while I had been away.

Making the best of a bad job, he had decorated the top of his shell with a number of the ingredients that I had left for him. He looked extremely gaudy and had an air of carnival about him. Striped top shells had been pasted on, interspersed with bits of coral and up near his head he was wearing two beadlet anemones, like an extremely saucy bonnet with ribbons.

I thought, as I watched him crawling about in the sand, that he looked exceedingly conspicuous, but, curiously enough, when he went over and squatted by his favourite overhang of rock, he turned into what appeared to be a little pile of shell and coral debris, with a couple of anemones perched on top of it.