tales of snails

A KORERO Report

NEW ZEALAND is a strange land with a strange fauna. The curious rarity of animals there is, of course, largely due to its being for ages cut off from the rest of the living world.

When I began to discover the sunny forests and bush of the narrow North Auckland peninsula I found a side interest in chasing a rare and bonny snail quite restricted to a small region in this northern part of little New Zealand. Chasing? Yes, amused pursuit of a slow snail; one so large and interesting as to collect many names—no bad ones. The Maoris call it *pupurangi*, snail of the skies—I suppose because the shell is sky-blue inside, or because they found it up in trees. The shell is strikingly large for a land snail, the average about two and a half inches at its widest, two inches its narrow diameter, one and a quarter inches high; but big ones can be nearly four inches.

On hatching, the shells are nut brown. They are flat-topped and only grow green with age. The snails build their shells, grow them as a house for the body. Most snails can be removed from their shells. Fanciers used to transplant them from shell to shell, and each new inmate would add a bit of its own style to its new and different dwelling. So you could get artificially banded and patchy-coloured shells. But a humble inmate of a slum dwelling forcibly put into a grand and beautiful home could only add slum walls.

It's hard to get the shell off without killing the proprietor, unless by carefully cutting away round the edges. You need to know what this snail's enemy, a native woodhen, has learnt that it's no good pecking the shell—it's so hard and glassy surfaced. He wisely nibbles round the edges, pecking it gradually away. At last, there! What a feast to the woodhen's eye, to the human pecker what a view! . . . the inside works working under the surface, the two-chambered heart beating. But, alas, alive it is very difficult to find out anything about the snail at all, so sensitive is it to touch and whatnot. Laborious detailed anatomy is necessary, and gives drawings and microscope plates of beautiful, varied unsymmetrical forms and figures — nerves, vessels, organs, and geometric details of shell structure. Asked how you got all this from a mere snail, you can truthfully answer, "I hacked him in pieces sma'."

I used to get into their out-of-the-way limestone and kauri forest world by bike or "snailways"—the Government system—and win a reputation among the "backblock" farmers for premature senile decay, wandering about in the bush on the hills in old clothes, crawling on my stomach after these so-called Gastropods or "stomach footed" things. Lonely farmers were obliging when they understood that you wanted to follow pigmy monsters and had to walk on your stomach nosing among moulds and roots. I met a very hospitable and sympathetic farmer, proud bearer of the name and blood of the famous eighteenth century French naturalist, Buffon.

A. P. Herbert pities the snail crawling about on its "tummy." This underside is not really the tummy; it and other inside works are up in the spiral part. It's its foot. This snail's foot is about 5 in. long, wide and leaf-like. Glands in