

The Boy Who Loved Bugs

THE STORY OF JEAN-HENRI FABRE



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

by Molly Sanchez *Illustrated by* Larissa Sharina



“Henri!” Grandmother called. “Jean-Henri! Time to come inside. The wolves will be coming down from the hills any time. Come in for some supper!”

Henri had been watching a dung beetle roll its treasured ball of dung clear across the farm. Henri was amazed at the beetle—how it sometimes tumbled with its ball of dung but held on and rolled with it. Most of the time, the beetle was head down, pushing the brown ball with its hind legs. Sometimes the beetle would stop and climb on top of the ball and look around, it seemed.

“What is it doing?” little Henri mused.

“Henri!” Grandmother called again.

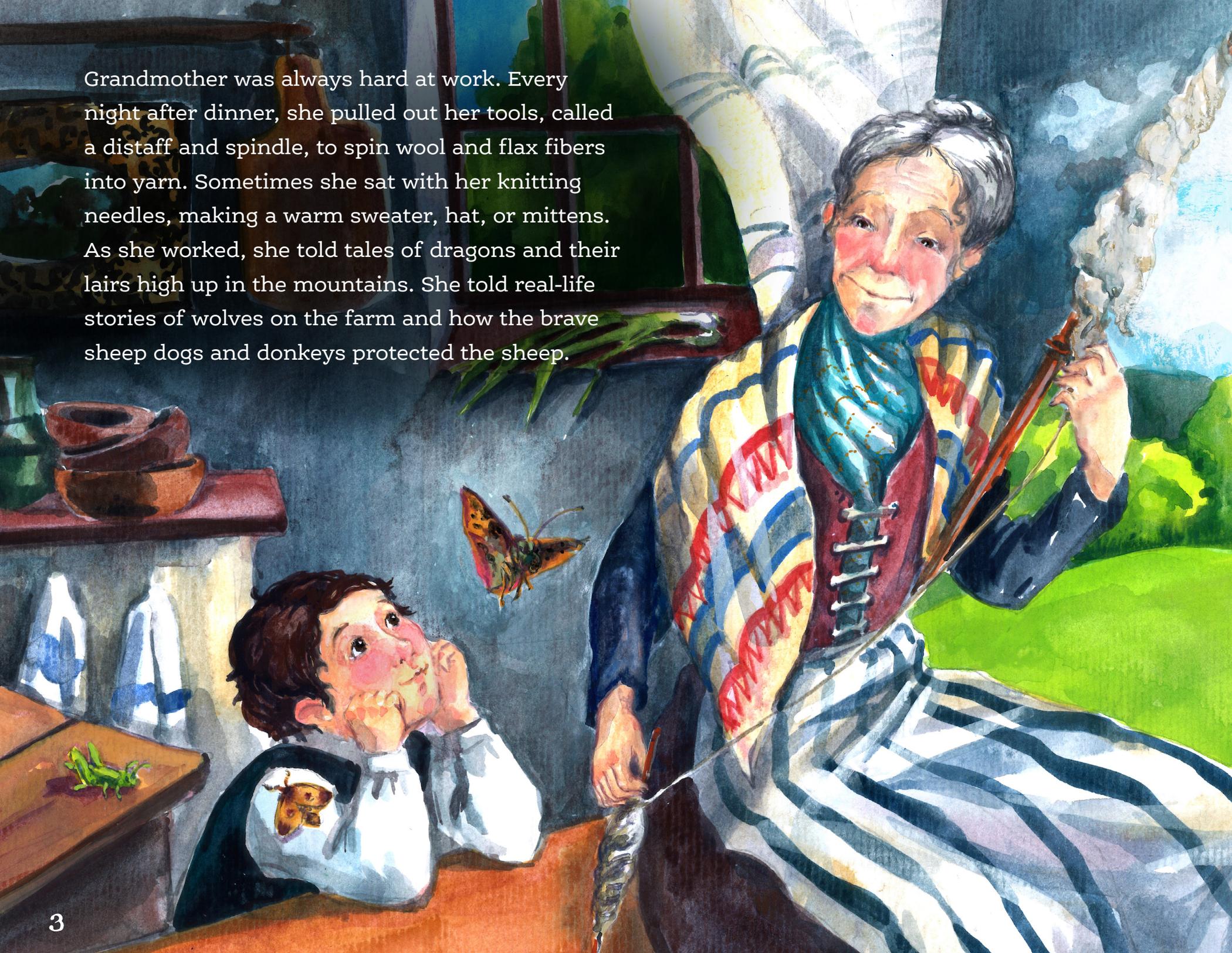
Five-year-old Jean-Henri Fabre ran into the small French cottage where he lived with his grandparents from 1829 to 1832. They had taken him in because his mom and dad were very poor and struggled to find work to feed their family.



The fireplace was warm and filled the small cottage with light as the sun went down.

Grandmother's bacon-turnip soup and hot loaf of rye bread filled the cottage with the happy smell of a good meal.

Grandmother was always hard at work. Every night after dinner, she pulled out her tools, called a distaff and spindle, to spin wool and flax fibers into yarn. Sometimes she sat with her knitting needles, making a warm sweater, hat, or mittens. As she worked, she told tales of dragons and their lairs high up in the mountains. She told real-life stories of wolves on the farm and how the brave sheep dogs and donkeys protected the sheep.





Each day Henri's job was to feed slop to the pigs. They snorted and snarfed up everything he dumped into their pigpen!

Grandmother let Henri help her milk the cow. "Henri," she said one day as they finished milking, "today you will help me shear the sheep." Henri helped by picking up the falling wool and putting it into a sack. Then they washed the wool and hung it out to dry.

Henri did not mind the hard work because most of it was done outside. He loved to feel the sun on his face, to hear the birds in the trees. Often he watched the grasshoppers hop from leaf to leaf. His eyes followed butterflies on their secret journeys.

At his grandparents' mountain cottage, Henri was the youngest child for miles around. No neighbors lived close by. When he wasn't helping on the farm, Henri entertained himself outside in the wonderful world of insects and forest critters. He loved to watch them; he was amazed by their colorful wings and bodies, their long legs, pincers, and antennae. He watched the ants in their red armor carry bits of food in long, long lines, finally arriving at their home and filing into the mound of dirt, one by one.





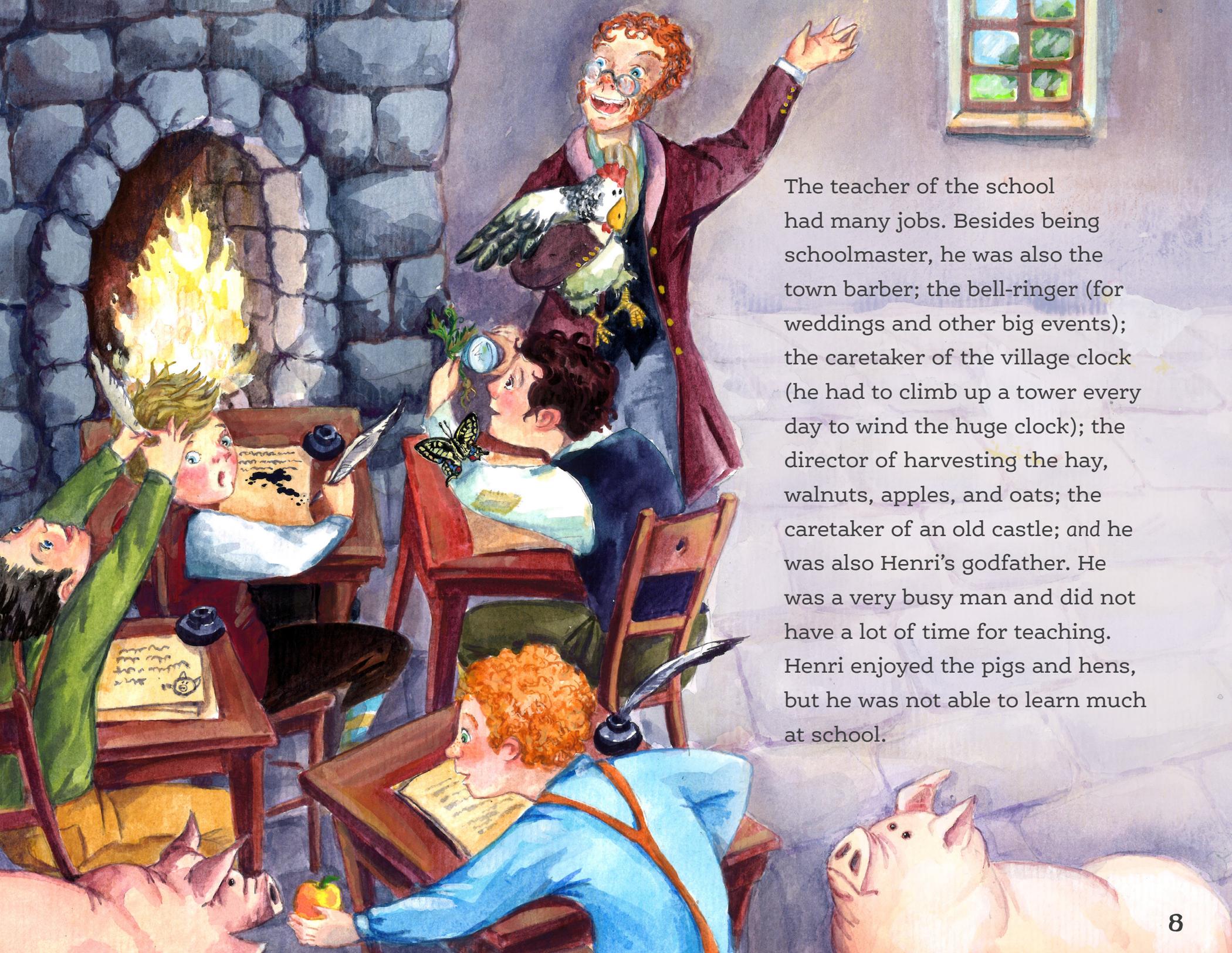
He sat for hours and watched a spider spin its delicate web, moving expertly over the tiny strings that came from its own body. For days in a row, he returned to the spider to see if it captured any food in its web.

Once, upon returning to the web, Henri saw a fly get stuck on the sticky threads. He watched as the spider stunned its prey and then covered it with layers of silky string.

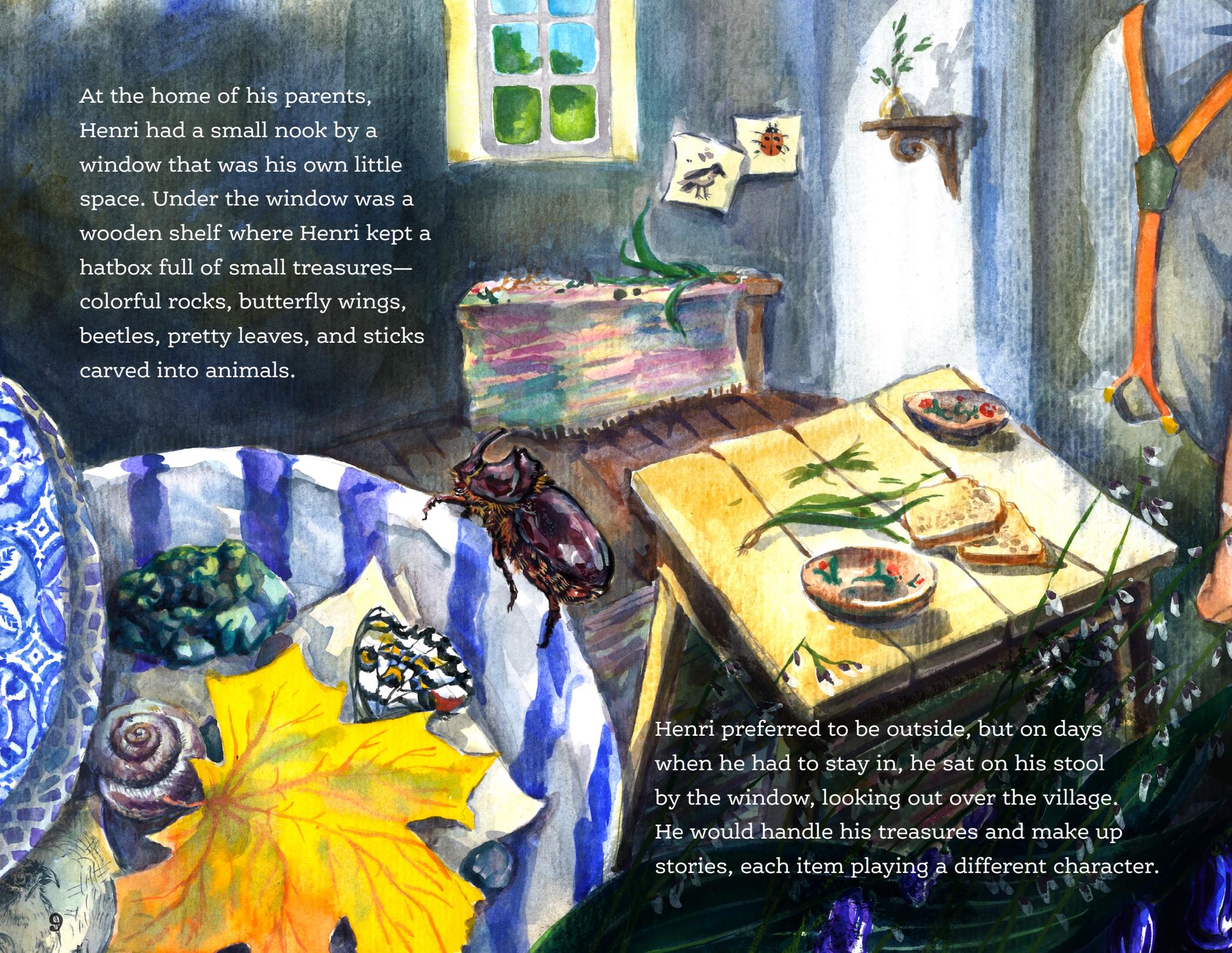
One day after Henri turned seven years old, Grandmother announced that he would be returning to the home of his parents to attend school. The schoolhouse was a one-room building with a huge fireplace and a loft. The room also served as a bedroom, a kitchen, a hen house, and a pigpen.

Henri's favorite things about the one-room school were the dozens of little colorful pictures that covered nearly every inch of the walls—paintings of princesses, kings, pirates, flowers, and children playing in a brook. They all delighted Henri.





The teacher of the school had many jobs. Besides being schoolmaster, he was also the town barber; the bell-ringer (for weddings and other big events); the caretaker of the village clock (he had to climb up a tower every day to wind the huge clock); the director of harvesting the hay, walnuts, apples, and oats; the caretaker of an old castle; and he was also Henri's godfather. He was a very busy man and did not have a lot of time for teaching. Henri enjoyed the pigs and hens, but he was not able to learn much at school.



At the home of his parents, Henri had a small nook by a window that was his own little space. Under the window was a wooden shelf where Henri kept a hatbox full of small treasures—colorful rocks, butterfly wings, beetles, pretty leaves, and sticks carved into animals.

Henri preferred to be outside, but on days when he had to stay in, he sat on his stool by the window, looking out over the village. He would handle his treasures and make up stories, each item playing a different character.