

The Chambered Nautilus¹

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
 Sails the unshadowed main,—
 The venturous bark that flings
 On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
 In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings, 5
 And coral reefs lie bare,
 Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
 Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
 And every chambered cell, 10
 Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
 As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
 Before thee lies revealed,—
 Its irised² ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil 15
 That spread his lustrous coil;
 Still, as the spiral grew,
 He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
 Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
 Built up its idle door, 20
 Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
 Child of the wandering sea,
 Cast from her lap, forlorn!
 From thy dead lips a clearer note is born 25
 Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!³
 While on mine ear it rings,
 Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
 As the swift seasons roll! 30
 Leave thy low-vaulted past!
 Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
 Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
 Till thou at length art free,
 Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea! 35

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¹The pearly nautilus, a mollusk of the Indian and South Pacific Oceans, long compared to a ship because of the air-filled chambers of the shell enabling it to float and a membrane once thought to serve as a sail, hence "nautilus," Greek for sailor. "If you will look into Roget's *Bridgewater Treatise*, you will find a figure of one of these shells, and a section of it. The last will show you the series of enlarging

compartments successively dwelt in by the animal that inhabits the shell, which is built in a widening spiral. Can you find no lesson in this?" (Holmes's note)

²Rainbow colored, as is pearl.

³In Greek mythology, Triton is the trumpeter of the ocean, stirring or soothing the waves by blowing a conch shell.