

MOTHER-OF-PEARL WORK.



IN May or June, when the ice is all melted and the water begins to grow warm, a Saxon fisherman prepares to resume his labours in the little river called the White Elster, and the various streams that flow into it. He is "Fisherman to the

King," and boasts that the office has been held by members of his family for more than 250 years. His hunting-grounds consist of one small river, eight brooks, and twenty-three mill-streams, which he divides into 310 portions, visiting each regularly once in ten years. He wears a pair of great sea-boots, and wades slowly up the stream, feeling with his left hand in the clay or sand at the bottom, and every now and then bringing to the surface sundry black-looking objects about four inches in length with convex sides. These he carefully opens about an inch, and out of some he cuts small, shining, round things, the largest being about the size of the kernel of a hazel-nut, while on others he marks the date of the current year, and then tosses them back into the water, to find their way home to their companions as best they may. For the "King's Fisherman," who dwells in that part of Saxony called the Voigtland, hunts not for fish but for pearls, and he procures, on an average, about 200 in the course of the year, some being really fine specimens, while others are merely what are known as sand-pearls. Pearls are secreted by several other mollusks besides the oyster, and indeed the precious Oriental pearl is furnished by the *Meleagrina margaritifera*, which is not an oyster at all, in spite of its being popularly so called. Some species of the pelican's-foot strombus, which in its earlier stages bears a great resemblance to the common whelk, have been known to produce pearls; and the fresh-water *Mya*, or gaping-shell, the *Mya margaritifera*, called also the pearl-mussel, has produced some of great size and value. The Romans were very eager to secure British pearls, and Julius Cæsar, on his return home from his conquests, dedicated to the Roman Venus a breast-plate set with fine pearls, from the river Conway in Wales.

Several large specimens have been found in the rivers of Tyrone and Donegal, and one weighing

36 carats would have been worth £40, but that its value was impaired by its want of purity. Other pearls from the same district have fetched from £4 10s. to £10 a-piece. In former times there was a great pearl-fishery in the river Tay, the pearls found between 1761 and 1764 being valued, it is said, at £10,000. The pearls in the Scottish crown, which now forms part of the regalia of Great Britain, are from the Tay fishery; and tradition says that a fine pearl, found in the Conway, was presented by Sir Richard Wynne, of Gwydir, to the queen of Charles II., and was afterwards placed in the royal crown of England.

But to return to the pearl-fisher of the Saxon Voigtland. One of these officials, some years ago, being much struck by the beauty of the mother-of-pearl which lined the shells of the river mollusks, conceived the idea of converting them into portemonnaies. There were a great many difficulties to be overcome before his idea could be carried into effect, but he succeeded at last, and in 1853 purses began to be made in considerable numbers and fetched very remunerative prices; while at the present time the manufacture affords a livelihood to nearly 1,000 persons. As soon, however, as a market was found for the hitherto useless shells, their unfortunate owners were threatened with a war of extermination. Thousands of them now are left to perish in heaps in musty cellars or in the broiling sun, and it seems but too likely that, like the goose of the golden eggs, the pearl-makers will be destroyed, at least in Saxony, by the eagerness and greediness of man.

As the river and streams of the Voigtland are strictly preserved, no one but the King's Fisherman and his subordinates has any right to collect the mollusks; but there are poachers here as elsewhere, and on one occasion the worthy official found in a cellar in Adorf 12,000 pair of shells, which had been stolen from his domains. As 150,000 pair are used yearly in each of the two principal factories in Adorf, not to mention the smaller ones, and as the only shells fit for conversion into purses are from 100 to 120 years old, it is evident that the supplies in the immediate neighbourhood would speedily be exhausted did the manufacturers depend wholly upon them. But this is by no means the case; boxes full of shells are constantly being sent to them from all parts both of Bohemia and Bavaria, since Adorf is at present the only place in Germany where the manufacture is established. When the first purses were made they sold for four shillings each, and as both merchant and tradesman took care to secure a handsome profit, the retail price was some five or six shillings. They are now sold wholesale at from threepence-halfpenny to one shilling and eightpence each, according to the quality of the workmanship and the materials used.

A mother-of-pearl portemonnaie passes through several stages and many pair of hands before it is ready for sale. In the first place, the shells are

ground on a rough sandstone, which in a few minutes removes their outer black covering and brings the nacre to light. In former days this used to be always the first process, but now they are often previously boiled with soap-stone, which certainly softens them and makes the grinding less laborious, but it also renders them less durable and less capable of retaining a polish. The next thing is to fit them together in pairs, and remove all the sharp corners, after which they are passed on to other hands, which cover them inside with a cement made of glue and gypsum. The next workman, armed with a coarse file, removes all unevennesses and roughnesses, giving five minutes to each pair of shells, and handing them over to another, who scrapes them with a smooth triangular iron to remove the marks left by the file. The sixth process is the rubbing with sand-paper, performed, as is much of the other work, by boys and girls. Two sheets of paper, one coarse and one fine, are required to rub seven dozen pair of shells, and then a seventh workman takes them in hand. His business is to do away with any scratches left by the sand-paper, and to render the surface perfectly smooth. This is done by means of a sort of turning-lathe, which resembles a grindstone, only that it is made of wood and covered with felt, which is smeared with a mixture of wax and pumice-stone. The shells now begin to acquire a slight polish, and when they have been rubbed with oil and tripoli or rotten-stone, they become quite lustrous, and the first part of the work is complete. Three dozen pair of shells are polished in this way in the course of an hour, by means of a little stick covered with felt. Still, the shells are only shells, and there is much to be done before they are converted into portemonnaies; but the remaining part of the work is usually done by the work-people in their own homes. This comprises the putting in of linings and pockets of satin, silk, leather, calico, shagreen, or paper, as the case may be, and the riveting of clasps and ornaments in brass, silver, or Britannia metal, the rivet-holes having been previously made by means of a steel wire while the shells were on the turning-lathe. Wages, of course, are less than formerly, owing to the diminished price obtained for the goods, and for filing, scraping, rubbing, grinding, and polishing a dozen pair of small shells only fourpence-halfpenny is now given, or sixpence and sevenpence the dozen for larger sizes, so that an industrious workman earns about eight or nine shillings a week.

Purses, however, have long ceased to be the only

articles fabricated from mother-of-pearl. The *Margaritana margaritifera*, or river-pearl-oyster, as it is popularly called, affords the material for brooches, earrings, buttons, snuff-boxes, match-boxes, ash-holders, bracelets, necklaces, &c.; while the *Meleagrina*, the sea-pearl-oyster, is used when more delicate colours and more lustrous tints are desired. Great banks of the *Meleagrina* exist in the Persian Gulf, off the island of Sunda, and in the Gulf of Mexico, and the shells are brought to Europe in ship-loads. It is to the *Meleagrina* that we are indebted for the delicate, rose-coloured mother-of-pearl, of which combs and ornamental pins, in the shape of butterflies, leaves, or flowers, are often made; but many of the univalves are now also pressed into the surface. The little mother-of-pearl boxes for holding lozenges, &c., now sold in the shops for a few pence, which look, so far as size goes, as if they might be made of a pair of shells resembling small mussels, only much more convex, are really made of slices taken off one of the large turbinated or spiral shells, of which the common periwinkle is a small but familiar example. Many of these shells are remarkable for the deep rainbow hues which adorn the interior of their dwellings. Some reflect the loveliest tints of pale green, pink, and gold, others a fine dark green, blue, and violet. In fact, all the colours of the rainbow are represented in one or other, and all are turned to account in the mosaics which adorn so many of our albums, caskets, clock-cases, picture-frames, letter-cases, inkstands, portfolios, needle-cases, &c. Some of the best materials for these mosaics are afforded by the various species of *Turbo*, commonly known as "tops," from their shape, which are divested of their brown-green outer covering by means of muriatic acid, and are then divided into small, convenient pieces by circular saws fixed to a turning-lathe. The pieces are polished and formed into mosaics, which are then polished again, and are so extremely durable as not easily to be broken even by a fall. Cowries of various species, as well as the strombus, scallop, cockle, and many other shells too numerous to mention, are also employed with good effect; and it seems probable that this comparatively new branch of industry may be still further developed in time.

As before said, the Adorf factories are at present the only ones of the kind in Germany. They are within an easy distance of the now famous baths of Elster, and the proprietors are always willing to allow visitors to inspect the work-rooms, which are well worth seeing.

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