

PEARL AND PEARL-SHELL GOSSIP.

BY W. B. LORD.

AMONGST the innumerable objects of interest and beauty cast by the tide at the feet of the seaside wanderer, shells are the most universal favorites, and it is by some of these that the pearl, the most rich and costly gift which the sea-nymph has it in her power to bestow, is formed. From periods of the most remote antiquity pearls have been highly prized and held in very great esteem. The pearl fisheries of the Red Sea, as long ago as the period of the Ptolemies, were celebrated for their great productiveness. The Babylonians, Persians, and ancient Egyptians held pearls in very high estimation, and it was from these nations that the Romans first acquired the taste for this description of jewel which afterwards led them into such fabulous extravagances concerning it. We are informed that Servilia, the mother of Brutus, was presented with a pearl by Julius Cesar, the value of which was £48,457. The well-known story of the pearl, valued by Pliny at £48,000, which Cleopatra is said to have dissolved and drunk in wine to the health of Antony at a banquet, has had some doubt cast on its probability from the fact of pearls not being readily soluble in common vinegar; but, from the custom which undoubtedly prevailed about this luxurious period, of enriching the goblet of the valued guest with molten gems, we see no reason for questioning its authenticity. Pearl ear-rings of great beauty and costliness were worn by the ladies of old Rome, much after the manner in which they are now. Those of Cleopatra were valued at £161,458; and so unbounded was the love for adornment of this kind, that Seneca felt called on to protest against the heedless extravagance of the ladies. It is very questionable, however, whether the gentlemen did not deserve a fair share of blame, as the pearl mania by no means confined itself to the fair sex. We find that victorious Pompey, when engaged in the highly agreeable amusement of turning out and rummaging amongst the jewel cases and treasure coffers of conquered Mithridates, found many crowns composed of pearls; and because that luxurious person had, instead of common pigments, caused pearls to be used in the execution of his portrait, that also added greatly to the delectation of Pompey. One very magnificent pearl was, during the reign of the Emperor Severus, split in two, and the halves were placed as decorations on the statue of Venus, which, at that time, appeared to be the most valued in the Pantheon. It is not to be wondered at that attempts should have been made to produce artificial substances in so much request. By Pliny the pearl is considered next in worth to the diamond, and he appears to have entertained some rather curious notions regarding its formation, being of opinion that, as drops of dew were swallowed

by the open oyster, so they in time became consolidated, and at length "true gems of the sea." Apollonius, the philosopher, states that the people living about the borders of the Red Sea treated the pearl oysters there residing in a very mean and treacherous manner. Thus, he informs us, did those designing individuals proceed: After having cast oil on the waters to still them, they dived down among the molluscs, artfully induced them by means of some attractive bait to open their shells, then stabbed them with a pointed instrument, and at the same time caught the clear water which flowed from the wounded fish in small perforations made in an iron utensil constructed for the purpose, in which it in time hardened into pearls. We have heard of an artful old sportsman who, for a consideration in money, dived for a powder-horn lost overboard by his nephew, and who, on being anxiously looked for through the clear, deep water, was seen sitting at the bottom, pouring all the gunpowder out of the recovered horn into his own. Surely he must have taken a leaf from the book of these ingenious ancients who dwell on the "Red Sea shore." The true pearl mussel of the sea (*Avicula margaritifera*), the so-called pearl oyster, was the unfortunate subject of these amiable experiments; but, as we shall see by and by, the rivers and fresh-water streams produce their pearl-yielding shells, the *unios*, or river mussels, being instances of these. That astute observer, Linnæus, discovered that grains of sand introduced between the fish and shell, inducing irritation, caused the secretion of pearly matter to take place, when the granules of stone took the pearl form. The news of this great discovery was in the year 1761 communicated to his king and the council, and an offer made to impart the secret for the benefit of the State; but from some unexplained cause or impediment, no doubt raised by the demon of red tape, no decided steps were taken in the matter, and we find that one Bagge, a speculative merchant of Gottenberg, became the purchaser of the great pearl secret for the sum of 500 ducats. Now it so happened that Bagge, who, unfortunately for him, lived before the great era of limited liability, died before his purchase made any return, or even found its way into a prospectus, and we find, in the year 1780, the heirs of the defunct speculator offering the whole mystery, sealed up, for purchase by the highest bidder. And here, alas! history and even tradition entirely fail us, as there is no evidence to show that any offer was made or a buyer ever found. The Chinese have for centuries practised with much success the art of artificial pearl production. They place a number of perfectly round beads, formed of mother-of-pearl, on a very fine string; these, during the summer season, are dropped between the open valves of the pearl mussel. Like the sand used by Linnæus, these hard bodies become sources of irritation;

and the creature, with the marvellous instinct with which so many of the lower organisms are endowed, at once proceeds to cover them with a smooth, glossy coat of pearl. So perfect is the resemblance between these spurious productions and the real gem, that a string of them were pronounced veritable pearls by two jewelers of repute in London; and until doubts as to their genuineness were cleared up by a German lapidary of Hatton-garden, the question of true or false remained a pretty open one. Solid moulds of various patterns are by the fisherman of the Ningpo River placed in oysters of the proper stage of development; these, after the requisite period has elapsed, are taken up, opened, and the objects, perfectly covered with mother-of-pearl, taken out by skilful manipulation, and sold to the native ornament manufacturers, by whom they are often very tastefully set and mounted. The true or oriental pearl is produced by *A. margaritifera*, and numerous localities scattered about the nooks and corners of the world have for ages been known to yield it. The Island of Ceylon, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, Cape Comorin, the Gulf of Manaar, Madagascar, California, and numerous other localities are known to afford it in pretty abundant quantities.

The pearl divers of Ceylon have so often been the subjects of written description that a brief notice is all we will venture on here. A heathen, long-winded crew, they sail away with the trade wind filling their sails until the fishing ground, marked out by careful survey, is reached. Then, with a heavy weight to aid in the transit to the depths below, they are lowered over the side of the native boat, speed rapidly to the oyster beds beneath, and with a strong knife dislodge a sufficient number of shells to fill a bag lowered for their reception, remaining at the bottom of the sea at work for about fifty seconds, when they relieve themselves of the sinking weight, come to the surface, and are followed by other divers, who in turn fill their bag or basket, which is hauled up after them. The work usually proceeds from break of day until between ten and eleven in the morning, when advantage is taken of the fresh sea breeze, and the little fleet speeds to land and discharges its spoils. Sharks, although placed under the supervision of a native department expressly organized to check and control their proceedings, sometimes prove far more free than welcome. Still the shark charmers contrive, by dint of native assurance and subterfuge, to maintain a standing, and no opportunity is let slip to strengthen the belief in their infallibility entertained by the ignorant divers. The ready wit of some of these rogues is most amusing. In addition to a regular stipend paid by Government, a royalty of ten oysters per boat per day is the due of each of these impostors. This, when numerous fees for written safeguards and protections are

added, swells the charmer's ill-gotten earnings to a very substantial amount. The captured shells, when brought to land, are either sold by a species of auction, the buyer taking all risks, or placed in pits or vessels to slowly become putrid. The *Colombo Observer* gives the following letter, which will serve to give some idea of the immense importance of the pearl fishery in the year in which it was published, 1858. "We have had ten days' fishing, and there is about £15,000 already in the chest. There will be ten days more fishing. Oysters sold to-day as high as twenty-five rupees (£2 10s.) per thousand." These fisheries have within the last few years fallen off so much that it has been thought wise to discontinue them until time shall have replenished the stock. Seven years are required to bring this desirable consummation about, as the pearl mussel requires that time before it arrives at maturity. The dead bivalves having lain together sufficiently long to cause death and partial decay, sea water is added to the mass, and the now open shells are freed from their contents by repeated washings and examinations; the grain is, so to speak, separated from the chaff. The larger pearls being easily distinguished, some seasons are much more productive in their yield than others. The year 1857 returned to the Cingalese pearl fishermen, or rather those who employed them, £20,550 15s. 6d. After all the specimens large enough to be gathered have been obtained, the last residue is strained through a species of filtering bag where all those of minute size are retained. Numerous sieves are afterwards had recourse to for dividing the distinct classes. Pearls are found of a variety of forms, ranging from the perfectly round to the elongated or "pear" shape, and the flat-sided or button form. Some adhere by a kind of a neck, more or less stout, to the surface of the shell, and these have to be very carefully detached by the aid of suitable instruments. Rough, warty, irregular excrescences not unfrequently occur on the surfaces of the valves. These masses are known in the market as *coq de perle*, and a variety of quaint and fanciful objects are fabricated from them on the Continent, advantage being taken of the odd resemblance which growths of this nature so constantly bear to the common objects of everyday life; apart from the estimation in which they may be held by the curious in such matters, they have little real value. The so-called button pearls are much used for setting when one side only is shown, and for this purpose command a fair price; round pearls are not unfrequently split with a view to the utilization of both halves. The pear-shaped description are much esteemed as pendants for ear or nose rings, which latter ornaments are much worn by the dusky belles of Eastern lands. The tint or color of pearls varies almost as much as their form, those of yellow shade being most

esteemed in Oriental countries, the "black," "lead-colored," and "pink" varieties each having their admirers in different parts of the world; but for the European gem market the pure white globular production, without spot, speck, or blemish, is that which commands by far the highest price. By gem dealers of great experience we are informed that although the market prices of pearls vary with the fluctuations of supply and demand, a pretty correct estimate of worth may be arrived at by dealing with the full weight of the specimen under consideration. Thus, perfect specimens of 100 grains may be approximately valued at from £8 to £11 per grain, very small pearls from £1 to £3, and the intermediate grades of weight in proportion. Amongst the pearl celebrities may be mentioned one of remarkable size and beauty, called "La peregrina;" its size is nearly that of a pigeon's egg; it was purchased by Philip of Spain in the year 1625, and the value set on it was 80,000 ducats. A Russian princess is said to be the possessor of this magnificent gem. That dusky potentate, the Imaum of Muscat, refused £30,000 for one which he has. Then the Shah of Persia, who in his own estimation is a far greater man than any Imaum of Muscat or any other prince, has a pearl of value somewhat in proportion to his high estate; £60,000 is the estimated value of this. England is not without its "pearls of price;" the Marquis of Abercorn owns one of the *drop* description of extraordinary size and beauty, and it is stated on good authority that the largest pearl in the world belongs to a Mr. Hunt. It is said to measure two inches in length and four in circumference, and the weight is given at 1800 grains, but we have no information as to where it was originally obtained. A record exists of the discovery of a most remarkable pearl at Catifa, in Arabia, a fishery of great antiquity; it was of the pearl form, perfectly free from blemish or imperfection, rather more than half an inch in diameter, and nearly three inches long; it was purchased by Tavernier for £110,000. The Empress of the French owns a pearl necklace said to be unsurpassed. Her Majesty Queen Victoria has also one, presented to her some time since by the East India Company, of much the same degree of excellence; but it is somewhat curious that an ornament of this description, made expressly for presentation to the Princess of Prussia at the time of her marriage, should have contained pearls, to quote from one of our most celebrated jewellers, "misshapen and of inferior quality." The preparation of pearls in order to render them fit for stringing is best conducted by the natives of India, who, from long practice, acquire wonderful dexterity in the art. The pearls undergoing the operation are nipped between two sticks, and the hole is then formed with an exceedingly fine drill. A number of superstitious notions are connected with pearls

throughout the East. The Hindoos attribute to the god Vishnu the power of creating them, and their possession is supposed to be a safeguard to virtue and a powerful charm against evil influences of all kinds; and frequent mention is also made of them in Holy Writ. The ancient inhabitants of Mexico were the possessors of immense pearl treasures, which their conquerors, the Spaniards, took excellent care to wrest from the Aztec nobility. According to tradition and some of the old Spanish historians, one of the palaces of Montezuma was elaborately decorated with both pearls and emeralds. The true pearl mussel (*A. margaritifera*), although by far the most important source, is by no means the only one from which these highly-prized formations are obtained. As we have seen further back, the fresh-water mussel (*Unio margaritifera*) has from the earliest ages been known to furnish them in very noteworthy qualities, and occasionally of sufficient size as to richly repay the fortunate discoverer. "Scotch pearls," as this description is not unfrequently called, have been eagerly sought for from the Roman invasion down to comparatively recent times; but, strangely enough, few persons of late have taken the trouble to follow up the pursuit of pearl seeking. Many rivers on the Continent produce the fresh-water mussel in great abundance, the rivers of Bavaria, Saxony, and other localities being celebrated for them. A very splendid collection was shown not long since at the Industrial Exhibition of Munich.

CONSTANCE.

BY MARY E. NEALY.

HAST thou forgotten, in the new-born glory
That fling'st a halo round that brow of thine,
A moon-lit eve of yore?—a soft, sweet story
Thou murmuredst once beneath the elm-tree hoary?
Sweet incense poured on young love's sacred
shrine!

Oh many a year has fled since we were parted,
And many a heart has ceased its weary beat,
And hope's bright wing has fanned the broken-
hearted,
While I from many a haunting dream have started,
To hearken for thy footstep in the street.

And morn and eve have passed. The full moon,
waning,
Has given her place to new light on the earth,
While, for long years, with bitter uncomplaining,
My unshed tears upon my lone heart raining,
Dimming the music of its oiden mirth.

I've gone. Yet since we first were doomed to sever,
When absence flung o'er sky and sea a blot,
Dimming all beautiful things of earth, I never
Have ceased to cherish that one dream forever
Within my soul. Oh say, hast thou forgot?

Oh tell me! By the years that I have wasted,
The flashing youth-dreams, lavished all on thee,
The scenes of joy from which my feet have hasted,
Life's rich red wine-cup I have left unfasted—
By all of these, dost thou remember me?