

The natives of Paumotu have been long in demand as whalemén. They are skilful boat-steerers, and to strike a fish none could surpass them in coolness and certainty. They are also, without exception, the best pearl divers in the Pacific, or perhaps in the world. They go down without weights or nose-stoppers (as are used by the fishers of Manaar or Baldein), but just plunge overboard naked as they stand; and you can get them down to as deep as 25 fathoms to clear a chain, or do other work, if you give them sufficient inducement. They are brave, faithful, honest, and kind-hearted; the only objection which can be made to them is that they are disgustingly independent, demanding high wages for their work, and essentially rowdy, exhibiting an incurable predilection for rum and loose company.

Those Europeans who know them well, and are accustomed to their ways, feel safer in their society than in that of any other natives in the Pacific under circumstances of difficulty and danger, whether it be in storms at sea or in quarrels upon savage coasts; and far and wide as they are known—even from Rapa to Rotumah—to say that a man is a Paumotu amounts to the assurance that he is a good man either to work or fight, but who at the same time will demand of his employers good pay, good usage, and the free exercise of his natural instincts. As a natural consequence with such a people, missionary endeavours have not amounted to much; they are utterly intractable, except as regards conversion to the Catholic faith, which the majority of them now profess, and in which they exhibit much enthusiasm, in so far as being especially careful not to leave their homes or to enter upon any adventure which may involve personal risk, without a stock of rosaries, scapularies, crucifixes, such as Carlyle describes as “spiritual block and tackle.”

The chief seat of ecclesiastical authority in the Paumotu group has long been Manga Reva, or Gambier's Isles, where resides a Romish bishop and community of friars, &c. The pearl fishery at this place has been immensely profitable, and a very great quantity of those precious gems have passed into the possession of the priests since the first establishment of a mission there, more than forty years ago. There can be little doubt but that it was from here that the large pearl was obtained now in the possession of Her Majesty, and which her agent purchased of Messrs. Storr and Mortimer for £6,000. One of their employés had bought it of a Tahitian trader in Valparaiso, and the common impression among the islands is that it came from Gambier's. Out of the 78 islands of the Paumotus, 35 are known to contain pearl shell in their lagoons. I am about to show what great profits have been made out of those deposits within the last thirty years by Tahitian and Chilian traders, at a time when mother-of-pearl commanded a price in the market amounting to usually not more than one-fourth of that which rules at present. It is very commonly supposed that the pearl fisheries of the Paumotus are exhausted. I shall also be so far able to make apparent that such is not the case, as to justify my previous assertion that the islands of the Low Archipelago constitute a mine of wealth of which the commercial world has at the present moment but little cognizance.

#### NO. VI.—THE LOW ARCHIPELAGO PEARL FISHERIES.

Of these isles, all with the exception of three are atolls, of that peculiar form of which the origin has so long been an enigma to geologists—that it is to say, that they consist of coral belts, frequently not more than a mile wide or even less, of a circular, oval, or sometimes triangular form, enclosing in the majority of cases a central lagoon with an entrance on the side opposite to the direction of the prevailing trade wind. These passages are in some instances navigable for vessels of large tonnage; in others they consist of a mere depression in the surface of the reef sufficient to enable the natives to paddle their fishing canoes in and out of the lagoon at high tide. The lagoons themselves are generally shallow, though in some places they exhibit vast hollows with an apparent depth of 50 or more fathoms. Their appearance is most extraordinary and beautiful; the water, from the absence of the debris of streams or of any kind of alluvion (from the fact of the land being entirely composed of coral rock and gravel), exhibits so surprising a transparency that an object the size of a man's hand may in calm weather be distinctly seen at a depth of 10 fathoms. The aspect of the bottom is that of a wilderness of marine vegetation of the most wonderful forms and gorgeous colours, seeming in some places to be spread over the surface of sloping hills, in others to be growing out from the sides of tall pillars or towers pierced with vast caves, in which the refracted beams of the sunshine cause the water to glow with the colours of the opal, and the innumerable species of zoophytes clinging to the rocks to glisten like gems, while between the huge caverned masses are wide spaces floored with sand perfectly level and white as snow, upon which the great green mounds covered with coral trees throw fantastic shadows, so that in leaning over the side of a canoe and contemplating these so remarkable appearances, one cannot escape being reminded of the fabled grove of Aladdin, or of that garden which Don Quixote imagined himself to have seen in the grotto of Montesinos, “*El mas bello amenoy deleitoso que puede criar la naturaleza.*” Amongst all this are to be seen great multitudes of fishes of the most extraordinary shapes and hues, gold and purple and violet and scarlet, jet black, mottled, and every shade of green.

In some of the enclosed lagoons of the Paumotus all the fish, without exception, are poisonous, of which the reason is unknown. Sharks are in great plenty, very bold and greedy, but quite harmless as a general rule to man, by reason of their natural food being in so great abundance. The pearl-divers take no heed of them. A much more disagreeable enemy is the vekí or great squid (the “pieuvre” of Victor Hugo, which he so graphically describes in his “*Travailleurs de la Mer.*” This horrible creature, who possesses the extraordinary faculty of being able within five minutes to change himself into fifty different forms, none resembling the other, but each more hideous than the last, is fortunately of a retiring disposition and excessively timid, otherwise he would constitute a most dangerous antagonist. He stretches out his long arms and seizes whatsoever comes within his grasp. But his most objectionable practice is that, when disturbed, he vomits a quantity of inky fluid, which renders the surrounding water intensely dark, so that the diver who may chance to encounter him under some overhanging shelf or coral cave, may become entangled in the gloom, and so lose his way to the surface or strike himself against the rocks. Fortunately within the lagoons these are small, and so incapable of mischief; but in the deep sea outside the coral reefs, they grow to enormous size, and on exposed fisheries, such as those of Panama, are a great source of dread to the Americans and