

shifted their quarters during the bad weather, for some reasons known to themselves, but to us not by any means apparent.

That an animal so suspicious in its aspect, and gifted with certain poisonous properties, should be in demand as an article of human food (and, moreover, regarded as a delicacy), seems beyond measure extraordinary; but it is a fact that the wealthy classes of the Celestial Flowery Land exhibit so remarkable a fondness for the flesh (if it can be so called) of this glutinous reptile as to pay an exceedingly high price for it. "There is reason," says Shakespere, "in the roasting of eggs;" and there is for this apparently eccentric appetite (independent of the fact of its being a mere gelatinous luxury)—a reason very patent to the Mongolian mind, but which it is not necessary for me to particularize. It is probable that any one prompted by special curiosity might get his mind enlightened upon the interesting subject by applying to our worthy fellow-citizen, Mr. James Ah Kew, forasmuch as Chinamen, so different in most respects to the rest of humanity, seldom do anything without a substantial reason, and generally have a correct understanding of the same. For many centuries past, Chinese mariners have frequented the coasts of the Indian Archipelago, of New Guinea, and New Holland, and it was from this course that the northern shores of that great island were as well known to them before the days of Marco Polo as they are to ourselves at the present time. When Captain Flinders was engaged in the first exploration of that locality, he encountered in one of the harbours a fleet of vessels which he at first supposed to be pirates, but which, on closer acquaintance, he found to be Chinese tripang fishers, with whom he became very friendly, and from their intelligent commodore he received some valuable information, and was shown by him a chart showing the features of the principal points of the coast, and their relative positions to those of New Guinea and Tinsor. There can be no doubt that it was from this source that the Dutch navigators of former days derived the information which directed them to the discovery of New Holland, and set the Spaniards speculating upon the precise localities of that land which they were the first to name Australia.

As concerns maritime enterprise in the coral seas, no traffic has ever done more towards assisting the progress of discovery than the tripang trade of China, not excepting the sperm-whale fishery, forasmuch as the whalers generally do but find islands, the beche-de-mer fishers land and live upon them until their cargoes are completed, and thus have been able to supply information not by other means obtainable.

It is commonly supposed that the market price of this singular substance in its prepared state is subject to great fluctuations. This is not really the case. The difference in price has, in the most cases arisen from the condition in which the article was delivered in China. As the superiority or otherwise of certain samples is not a question of seasons or circumstances over which the fishers have no control, but simply of sufficient experience, and due precaution, or *vice versa*, I purpose next to describe circumstantially the different processes of preparation and stowage as practised by those who have been most successful in the trade.

The beche-de-mer fishery is one of those occupations which, while they involve no actual risk, can be entered upon with a very limited capital. In the majority of cases it is prosecuted by seafaring men, who having become weary of a life of hard work and little to take for it, on board of whale ships or merchant vessels, have landed from them on one or other of the Pacific isles, and, becoming domesticated among the natives, enlist their services in this pursuit, remunerating them for their labour by dividing among them a portion of their profits in the shape of printed calico, blue beads, tomahawks, tobacco, and other necessities. They are usually rough and wild fellows, but withal hospitable and generous, as men must needs be who spend their lives among the copper-coloured Polynesians, for Maoris hate a mean man, and will not long endure his society; their motto is, "Disburse, divide; let your good fortune boil over in the direction of your friends; we are brothers, why should we not share with one another?" Consequently these men are usually poor, but of great power amongst the savage tribes with whom they choose to spend their days. They dictate terms to traders in dealing with the natives for whatsoever they produce; they advise the chiefs; they interpret, and receive commission for so doing (generally in the form of tobacco and "chain lightning,"—that is to say, the frightful liquor which is carried about the Pacific under the names of square gin, fatoa rum, or the like elixirs). These men are a sort of practical philosophers; they are outsiders of civilization, and they accept the situation *con amore*:

"They have burst all links of habit,
And have wandered far away;
On from island unto island,
At the gateways of the day."

It is a common practice with them to build small crafts with the assistance of the natives, or to get hold of ships' boats and "raise upon them;" and in this sort of vessel they cruise from one desert island to another, carrying cocoa-nuts for provender, and eking out the rest of their subsistence with fish, turtle, and sea-birds' eggs. When they find an atoll which produces beche-de-mer in anything like abundance, they squat down for a few months, or it may be a year or two, and cure and store it up until some passing vessel calls to purchase it; and if no such chance should occur, they fill their little vessel with a part of it, and going to some of the great islands where merchants are used to resort, they agree with some of them to send a vessel for the remainder. These men lead strange lives, and full of adventure—they are thoroughly acclimatized, and so deeply indoctrinated with barbarian ideas as to be sometimes apparently in doubt as to whether they had ever lived in civilized land. Once in the Kingsmill Island I had a conversation with a man of this kind relative to the best way of cooking a cray-fish. "We," said he, "are used to cooking them in an oven of hot stones, but white men mostly like them boiled in a pot." It was evident that his mind was in somewhat of a fog as to whether himself had any claim to be ranked among the sons of Japhet. Another, who is now living on Manuai, asked me to read a certain paper for him. "Were you never taught to read?" I inquired. "Oh, yes," he replied, "I had a good schooling once, but it's so long ago, that I don't know English from Dutch when it's wrote down." This man's son (who spoke good English), remarked to me that he should very much like to be able to read. "Don't you try to know too much," replied I; "knowledge is only a lot of bother" (Solomon, I believe, was of this opinion). "Ah! but," continued he, "I should like to read the Bible;