

that's what it was. This man had found a great deposit of it on a volcanic island recently in eruption. He had filled his vessel and was on his way to Europe with it, and it proved the most valuable cargo he had ever carried in his life, for the Russian Government, purchased it at a high price, for the purpose of making cement to lay between the stones of their fortifications. But as concerns beche-de-mer, men may stroll about the seas looking for islands whereon to cut wood, or to dig ashes or guano, to make barilla, or to pick fungus, or to "gather shells from youth to age," as the poet says; but what say you to catching snails? a singular operation verily! but an immensely profitable one, ludicrous as the thing may appear.

Beche-de-mer, called by the Chinese "Tripang," and by the Polynesian "Rodi," in the South Sea, and in the Caroline Group, "Menika," is of that species of mollusc classed as the "Holothurides." It has the appearance of a great slug or leech, and, like most other marine animals of the same type, lives upon suction and upon microscopic animalcules. Its anatomical structure is simple. It has the form of an elongated sac, of a gristly consistence, traversed internally by strong muscles; the rest consists of intestines, which are perfectly transparent, and, on examination, appear to contain nothing but water and sand—of the latter a large proportion, although what part so indigestible a substance may be disposed to play in the economy of its organism may be known to the creature itself, but has always been an enigma to me. The mouth of the beche-de-mer is triangular, with three teeth like those of a leech. It has no appearance of eyes. Its powers of locomotion are limited, so much so that one could not perceive it to move except by observing its relative distance from any neighbouring object. Its normal condition is that of repose; its existence is doubtless a very harmless one, but its sphere of usefulness is somewhat circumscribed. It seems to have few enemies with the exception of the turtle, which only molests it in the days of its youth and at certain seasons of the year. Crawling along the mossy coral of the snow-white bottom of the lagoon, it leads a life of passive enjoyment, which seems to consist in taking water and sand at one end, and squirting it out at the other. There are four kinds of beche-de-mer—the gray, the black, the red, and the leopard. The gray kind is the most valuable, but is only found where the hawksbill turtle is found—that is to say, not much to windward (eastward) of the 180th meridian. It grows usually, when at maturity, to about 18 inches long, and somewhat less in circumference. The colour is a slaty gray, and it is distinguished from the other species by having upon either side a row of little protuberances like teats. It frequents the flat reef and the sandy bottom of shallow lagoons. The black beche-de-mer lives only on clean sandy bottoms at a depth of from knee-deep at low water down to ten fathoms. It grows large, sometimes as long as 30 inches, and as thick as a man's leg. On the back and sides it is jet black, smooth and bright, like enamelled leather; the under side is slaty gray. When very old it becomes encrusted with small shells. The red kind is the smallest, and of the least value; it seldom attains more than a foot in length, usually less. It lives upon the coral reef; in the greatest profusion towards the outer edge where the surf breaks continuously. In this respect it differs essentially from the black kind, which delights in quiet waters and smooth sand, and will not live either in noisy waves or on rough rock. The leopard kind grows as large as the largest of the black; it is of an olive-green colour, variegated with green spots surrounded by an orange-coloured rim; hence its name. It has another peculiarity; all beche-de-mer are harmless when laid hold of but this one. On those occasions he spues out of himself a quantity of slender filaments resembling white cotton lamp-wick; he can produce several hanks of it; it is glutinous, and whatsoever it touches it attaches itself to in the most tenacious manner. This would not signify if it were merely satisfied with sticking fast, but it is not so; wheresoever it clings it burns like a blister, and upon any part of the human skin produces immediate and painful inflammation. An American whaleman, who was walking with me on one occasion upon a coral reef, trod upon one of these creatures with his bare foot, and got blistered in consequence. "Wonderful," said he "are the works of nature. I had used to believe that Providence made all things for some good purpose, but what good use can be in this darned reptile, it surpasses my means to imagine." "Never you mind, sonny," said I, "Providence knows better than we, and that ugly slug is worth 500 dollars a ton in Shanghai; if we could only get enough of it there."

It was said by King James I., that "he was a brave man who first undertook to swallow a live oyster;" but he who first with his bare hand took hold of a live beche-de-mer deserved at least an equal amount of credit, seeing that it is an essentially hideous and venomous-looking thing; the which last supposition is not altogether without foundation, forasmuch as it possesses some very poisonous properties. Thus its intestines are always full of water, which one might suppose, from the way in which it lives, to be common harmless salt water, but it is not so. When taken hold of, it squirts out the water which it contains, sometimes in a spiteful manner, and with evident malicious intent. If a drop of this liquid enters the human eye it produces a sensation like that of contact with a red-hot coal, resulting in violent and dangerous inflammation; if inoculated into any abrasion of the skin, the consequences are still more serious. I have known men to come very near losing their eyesight, and to suffer weeks of great misery and pain from this cause. It has been generally supposed (I believe by men of science) that this mollusc is of slow growth. This is not so. They will increase from an inch in length to the size of a man's hand within three months. They have other peculiarities, for which it is not easy to account; for instance, they are not found everywhere upon a coral reef or lagoon bottom, but in great patches, which proves them to be gregarious and of a sociable disposition. They possess also a certain degree of intelligence, which is evident from existing facts, but which does not seem easy to explain; as thus: these creatures (which have no apparent eyes) have some means of communicating with one another, and a very certain knowledge of each other's proximity. Thus, frequently after having discovered in any one place a greater multitude of these slugs than it was possible, from our means of transport, to have carried home to the curing-houses, it was our practice to lay them down on coral rock, with the intent to call for them again on the morrow; but it was usual afterwards to find them in congeries, whereas we had left them the previous day one here and one there, far apart from one another. Again, if a man should strip all the visible beche-de-mer from any part of a coral reef, and immediately afterwards the wind changed and came on to blow heavily, after the subsidence of the gale that place would be found as thickly crowded with these molluscs as it had been previously; which leads one to infer that they had been lodged in the cavities of the coral, and had