

For one branch of Commerce, the Pearl Fishery, California has been famed from its first discovery. The glory and the riches derived from this source are, however, almost traditional; at least, the actual amount of the trade is insignificant. Nevertheless it is by no means certain that the sources of a beneficial commerce in this respect do not yet exist, provided proper means were taken for pursuing it with effect.

Long before the discovery of America by the Europeans, the natives of many of the maritime parts of it were acquainted with the art of diving for pearls, as these were found by the first discoverers to be held in great estimation as ornaments.* Hernando de Soto found them in great quantity in Florida where the tombs of the native princes were ornamented with them; and among the presents made to Cortez by Montezuma before his entry into Mexico, necklaces of precious stones and of pearls are mentioned by Gomara: these Cortez sent to the Emperor Charles V. The Incas of Peru, also, we are told by Garcillasso, set a great value on pearls, but the laws of Manco-capac prohibited the natives from exercising the trade of diver, as being dangerous to the individual and not very profitable

* It was not indeed necessary that they should be divers in order to possess pearls, as we find from the voyage of Father Consag (Venegas, vol. ii, p. 310,) that in certain places (as at Cape San Miguel in lat. 29 deg.) the sea throws up on the shore great quantities of them.

to the state.* After the discovery of America the traffic in pearls became considerable. They were found chiefly near the island of Cubagua, in the mouth of the Rio de la Hacha and in the gulf of Panama near the Islas de las Perlas (whose inhabitants still pursue the fishery), on the shore to the north of Acapulco, and on the east Coast of California, in the gulf. We are told by Acosta that in 1587, 697lbs of pearls were imported into Seville from America, upwards of 11lbs. of which were of the greatest beauty and destined for the king, Philip II. The pearl fisheries of Cabagua and Rio de la Hacha seem to have been of short duration; and their exhaustion turned the traders more eagerly towards that of California, which had already supplied the crown of Spain with its richest pearls, found in the expeditions of Yturbi and Pinadero. In those times the trade in pearls was certainly very considerable; and this continued to be carried on, without any restriction, up to the period of the settling of the country by the Jesuits. It is stated by Torquemada that previously to the arrival of the strangers, the Californians hardly put any value on the pearls, as they were in the habit of throwing the oyster into the fire, in order to obtain the flesh for food; the pearls being destroyed by the same process. "But the avidity of others" he adds "has

* Humbolt's New Spain.

communicated its flame even to this simple people; who are now eager to get, and careful to keep, what they have seen highly valued by foreigners." The conduct of the Jesuits in regard to this fishery has been already stated: it was strictly forbidden on account of the oppression and cruelty to the natives to which it led.

The rude and savage adventurers of those days little regarded the welfare or even lives of the Indians when put in competition with their own selfish interests; and it was customary to kidnap and employ by force as divers in the pearl fishery all they could lay their hands on, on the coasts and islands of the gulf. Many of the natives, no doubt, voluntarily lent themselves to this employment, under certain terms of remuneration; but this was rather the habit of the few regular traders than of the many casual adventurers who sought the peninsula in search of its boasted treasures. A characteristic illustration of this fact is mentioned by Father Consag in his voyage for surveying the coast of California in 1746, and which we believe to be no less just as indicative of the character of the Fathers than it is of the practices of the pearl-fishers. On reaching a part of the coast near the top of the gulf, he says, "The people on seeing the canoes took us for *divers* and fled up the country; the outrages and brutality of these men having ren-

dered them equally dreaded and detested by all the natives of California; but on being made acquainted by some of their countrymen, who were with me, that *A Father* was come in the canoes, they immediately returned*." It is, indeed, true, that after the establishment of the Jesuits, the pearl fishery, which had been previously greatly interrupted by the opposition of the natives originating in these cruelties, began to be prosecuted with greater vigour and success than ever, now that the divers were left in a considerable degree unmolested; but the divers and traders did not belong to California but came from the opposite shores of the gulf, whose inhabitants to this day are the principal fishers. The Jesuits had the influence to obtain authority from the government not only for excluding all vessels from fishing in the gulf except such as had the Viceroy's license, but also that the military commandant in California (who, be it remembered, was under the authority of the Fathers) should have the power to examine and verify these licences and to prevent the approach of all vessels not provided with them. It was expressly forbidden to every one, whether soldiers or seamen, belonging to the missions to have any thing to do with the fishery; a regulation which excited extreme discontent at the time, but which the Fathers had

* Venegas.

the power to get fully carried into effect. Their reason for debarring their people from this trade, was their conviction, founded on experience, that, if permitted, it would not only seduce them from their proper duties in the missions, but would inevitably lead to the oppression of their children the Indians—as they termed them.

At the period of these regulations, at the very commencement of the seventeenth century, the revenue to the crown was not inconsiderable, as the king's share (a fifth) amounted to no less than 12,000 dollars per annum for every bark employed. After the expulsion of the Jesuits the trade seems to have declined greatly, partly no doubt from the exhaustion of the oyster-beds, but partly also from the mismanagement of the whole system adopted in its prosecution.

When the pearl fishery was prosecuted to its greatest extent, from six to eight hundred Indian divers called "Busos" were employed; it was carried on by small vessels of from fifteen to thirty tons burden, which were fitted out by private adventurers, and carried each from thirty to fifty divers. The owners accompanied the vessels, and carried with them provisions for the people, and a little money to advance them in the course of the season. The place of fitting out was at the port of Guaymas on the opposite coast, and when ready

they had to procure a license from the Commandant-general of the province of Sonora in which that port is situated; being so provided they made sail for the coast of California, and cast anchor on such banks as contained pearl oysters, which banks are called "Placeres." The whole fishery, however, was not anciently carried on by vessels of the size above mentioned; and, perhaps, decked vessels were not at all then employed. The armadores went in launches, and the divers used canoes, bringing the oysters on shore for the purpose of opening them. This is evident from the large heaps of shells yet remaining in many spots. Numerous canoes are still attached to the larger vessels employed at the present time.

The manner of carrying on the fishery was as follows:—The vessel being anchored, and every thing ready, the divers plunged down in all directions, and dug up with a sharp-pointed stick as many oysters as possible while they could remain under water; they then came up, took breath, and at the same time deposited the oysters in bags hung over the vessel's sides. Having done this, they again plunged under water, repeating the same operation till the bags were full, or the usual time for working expired; they then all came on deck with the bags, and placed themselves in a circle round the owner, or as he was called the "armador," who

took the contents of the whole bags and made a division as follows:—two oysters for the armador, two for the busos, and one for the king; proceeding in this way till the whole of the oysters were disposed of. When this operation was concluded, they all began to open the oysters, beginning with those which fell to the lot of the armador, but without moving from the circle which they had formed round him; and he had then to watch with the utmost vigilance, for they had a dexterous knack of swallowing the most valuable pearls along with the live oyster, which they threw into their mouths by a kind of slight of hand, which it was almost impossible to detect. The king's fifth was then opened under the same precautions, and the pearls deposited in the presence of all. Lastly, the divers opened their own oysters, and the pearls were equally divided amongst them, and generally sold on the instant to the armador, to whom they were always indebted for their outfit, and for previous advances. They however never failed to reserve some which they sold to the dealers on shore who always accompanied the busos, and who often made more money than the armadores. Those dealers carried with them spirituous liquors, chocolate, sugar, cigars, and other cheap articles of which the Indians are passionately fond; and for which they often exchanged pearls of great value.

The season for carrying on the fishery is from the beginning of July till the beginning of October. The exact value of pearls produced while this business was prosperous cannot be now easily ascertained. It has been variously estimated. From documents supplied to Mr. Hardy in 1825 and published in his *Travels in Mexico*, it is stated on the authority of Don Jose Maria Retes, that the number of vessels employed annually on the fishery of Loreto was from six to eight, and the quantity of pearls from four to five pounds weight, worth from 8 to 10,000 dollars. Captain John Hall, an experienced navigator and trader in these seas, gives us some valuable information on this subject about the same date. A letter of his is published in Mr. Hardy's travels; but we have obtained much further information from him on this and other matters touching California. He gives a somewhat different version of the mode of proceeding in the distribution of the oysters in the year 1825. He says "every time the diver comes up, the largest oysters which he may bring with him are placed on one side for the Virgin. All the rest are then thrown into a large pile, and in the evening they are divided thus: eight shells are put on one side for the owners, eight on the other for the divers, and two in a third heap for the government." It would thus appear that the present ruling powers are con-

tented with one-half the share of their predecessors. It is, however, somewhat curious, in these times, that the Virgin should retain her full privileges, if not an augmentation of them. Mr. Hardy says that about sixteen or eighteen small vessels are annually employed in the fishery, and obtain when the weather has been favorable and the divers fortunate about 500 dollars' worth of pearls each,—sometimes as much as 1000 dollars. He adds, however, that the expence of the fitting out and other contingencies, reduce the net profits to the proprietors very considerably.* The following statement, kindly furnished me by a friend who resides on the spot, will shew the extent and value of this fishery in the year 1831.

This year two vessels sailed on the Pearl Fishery from the Port of Guaymas, and other two from the River Yaqui in its vicinity, as also two boats: the whole carried two hundred Busos; the largest vessel had seventy; the next fifty; the third thirty; the fourth also thirty; and the boats ten each. One vessel brought forty ounces of Pearls, great and small, which were valued at 6500 dollars; another twenty-one ounces, valued at 3000 dollars; another fifteen ounces valued at 1800 dollars, and the fourth twelve ounces valued at 2000 dollars; making the value, exclusive of the two boats,

* Travels in Mexico, p. 238

amount to 13,300 dollars, or about two thousand six hundred and sixty pounds sterling.

It has always been the popular opinion among the Spaniards, that there were immensely rich banks of Pearl Oysters on the shores of an island near the head of the Gulf called Tiburon; but that its inhabitants, who use poisoned arrows, were of such a savage disposition, that no one could approach it without being sacrificed: this originated in or at least was confirmed by the circumstance of some people being killed near it, and in consequence the king of Spain, whose laws seemed always to be made on the supposition that none of his subjects had the power to risk his own life, or the common sense to judge when it was in danger, decreed, that no one should hereafter approach that island for any purpose, or on any pretext whatever. This interdict has been to the present time strictly obeyed, and although the Mexican Republicans have thrown off the Spanish dominion, yet the dominion of early prejudice is not so easily got rid of, and consequently the island of Tiburon is still considered by the Mexican Spaniards as equally rich and perilous as heretofore; although recent visitors, and among others Mr. Hardy, have proved the risk and the riches to be equally apocryphal.

The most remarkable incident in the recent history of the Pearl Fishery of California is the fact