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**FRESH WATER**

**Pearls.**

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**JANE SIMMONDS**

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PEARLS

BY VANE SIMMONDS

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**The Author.**

# FRESH WATER PEARLS

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BY VANE SIMMONDS

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The simple expression, "gathering pearls," has a fascination for the uninitiated, and creates a lively interest in the minds of many who still cling to the romantic side of life; but let them gaze into a plush-lined jewel case containing hundreds of glistening fresh-water gems, and I doubt not their lively interest would develop into a case of "pearl fever."

Where are pearls found? What Specie of shells bear pearls? In what part of the shell are

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they found? Which is the most valuable color? What are they worth? Who buys them?

These questions and many more are asked daily by those seeking information.

That much desired information regarding both marine and fresh-water pearls is meagre. Science does not handle the subject very clearly as to their origin; hence our highest authority must be termed short-sighted upon this chapter of Nature's handiwork.

Meanwhile the pearl—the only precious gem which is not fashioned by the hand of man—passes through its various stages of growth toward perfection, hanging suspended from the glittering walls of its beautiful prison until released by some lucky pearl-hunter.

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The clam migrates as regularly as the seasons change. In shallow water during the summer months; then seeking a depth of from five to ten feet as the cold weather advances. Here it lies partly dormant until the following spring, when growth and activity are again resumed. Nearly every stream and lake east of the Missouri River contains, to a greater or less extent, pearl-bearing mussels. Many of these tributaries are lined with lime-stone ledges (claimed to be a pearl producing quality). Many of those that are not navigable have mill-dams crossing them at intervals of every ten or twelve miles. In the mud and sediment of the "backwater" the "rough-shelled" Unios (the richest pearl-bearer) accumulate by the thousands. It is

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here the fisher wades or rakes the mussels from the soft mud.

It is interesting to know that the aborigines of this country appreciated the beauty of pearls quite as much as do the most cultivated Americans of to-day. W. E. Myer, of Carthage, Tenn., opened an Indian burial place and found a "gorget" or necklace of scallops strung with pearls. The latter were of remarkable size, but long burial and contact with the earth had rendered them chalky and valueless. Professor Warren K. Moorehead of the Ohio State University and Professor G. W. Putnam of Harvard University opened a sacrificial mound near the great Serpent Mound in Ohio and took from it two bushels of pearls. All were ruined and bore evidence of

Specimens of Fresh Water Pearl-Bearing  
Unios.







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having been subjected to a hot fire at the time they were offered in sacrifice—probably to stay the ravages of a plague or the invasion of an enemy.

At Paterson, N. J., in 1857, were discovered the first fresh-water pearls brought to public attention in America. In 1878 settlers along the Little Miami River, in Ohio, found a few good specimens in the mussel shells of that stream. Not until 1883, when pearls were found in astonishing numbers in shells taken from the Cumberland River, in Tennessee, did the industry of fresh-water pearl fishing have a beginning. From the year of its discovery to the present the Cumberland has yielded an annual pearl crop worth \$150,000. No finer white pearls are found

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anywhere than those taken from the Tennessee streams. The greatest find in the fresh-water field is that of White River, Ark., discovered in 1879. The year following the opening of these fisheries they yielded at the lowest calculation \$400,000 worth of exquisitely colored pearls which were brought to New York and sold to various houses, but mostly to Herman Myer, the Maiden Lane pearl expert. When American pearls were discovered London dealers, thinking they would flood the market, as an excuse to gain time to dispose of Orientals, said that American pearls would lose color and lustre. Because of this report still obtaining credence among wearers, American pearls do not bring one-half the price of Orientals of the same quality, shape and size.

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Four Wisconsin pearl-hunters fished the Cedar River for many miles a few years ago. The writer visited their camp, located a mile above Charles City, Ia. Here was displayed all the abandon of a happy-go-lucky crowd. Having made the shaded banks of the stream their home for many weeks, this mode of life gave to them a shiftless, easy-going style, so readily adopted by those following this line of work.

Each member of their party was furnished with a boat, rubber wading-pants, a long-handled basket rake and an ordinary case knife. Stepping into the stream where the shells were thick, it took but a short while to load a boat with them.

Drawing the batch beneath the first friendly shade, the process of opening was in order. For

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this purpose a common table knife was used. Running the thin blade entirely through the clam (following the hinge) severs both muscles and the valves easily part. The thin mantle of flesh lining both walls are hastily felt over with the thumbs, for one can feel what the eye cannot detect—although this process is quite unnecessary when the pearl is of good size, for the flesh-covering is so slight it is readily noticeable.

(NOTE.—Scientific authorities claim that all pearls originate from an irritation caused by foreign substances, that is, a small particle of sand or wood, or even an abortive egg. As to how this mantle *takes up* or envelopes these particles with flesh, and forms a spherical gem, is left to the imagination of common mortals).

## ❁ ❁ FRESH WATER PEARLS ❁ ❁

Having the power of secretion, this mantle throws over these irritating particles a naceros covering which is the fundamental growth of pearl and shell.

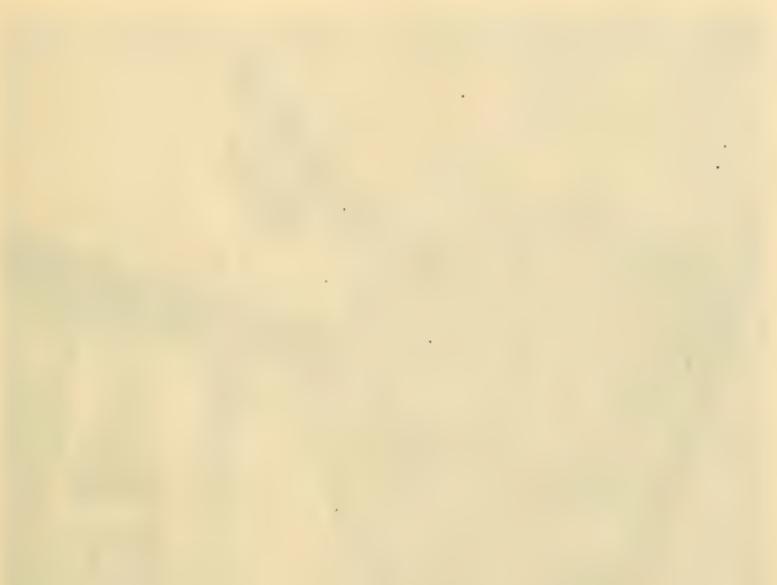
As to the industry of fresh-water pearl fishing, it is certainly in a most undeveloped stage. About \$500,000 worth of pearls are annually taken from the streams of this country, and this is only a fraction of what the pearl crop might be made to be every year, for where there are clam or mussel shells there are pearls. To make this statement is easy, but to convince people living along a stream not known to have produced pearls is a difficult matter. A river, like a prophet, has generally little honor in its own country. "What! pearls in our own home river?"

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is the question asked on a new stream when it is endeavored to set the industry in motion. Then the incredulous often add: "Well, it'll be time enough to believe that when I can dig gold out of the garden."

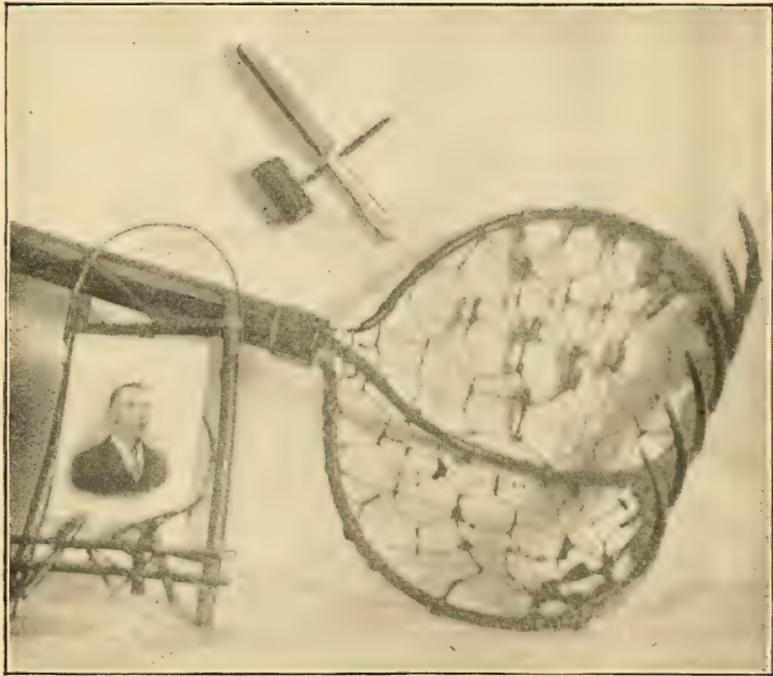
The opinion seems to prevail that the value of a pearl depends on its size. This is not at all true. It depends mainly on the color and lustre, and next, on its shape. Another popular error is that a pearl having an irregular, warty or pitted surface may be cut or ground to a desired shape and a smooth surface. This is not the case, as the touch of the instrument completely destroys the lustre.

The most expert and conservative dealers in pearls are now ready to admit that the silvery globe



A Pearl Hunter's Kit.







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taken from the American clam is superior to the Oriental article.

The former has the brilliant lustre of a drop of mercury, while the latter is more like a globule of cream.

To be successful in the pursuit of pearls, one must bear with patience the possible disappointments which are liable to occur on the first trial or two. Gold in the Klondike is not found without one hundred-fold the trials that even a novice at pearl fishing will incur.

The pearl, which your mind's eye has fashioned, while gathering the bivalves, may be in the first or last shell of your boatload. Always thinking the "next one" will be a \$500 beauty, however, holds one fascinated until the last shell is opened.

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Ask a pearl-hunter any fair question and if he is not "soured" by ill-luck, he usually has a willing and ready answer; ask him "what luck" he is having, ten to one he is "mum." Possibly the above-mentioned hunters took pity on me and my burning curiosity, for, just before leaving them, they displayed (and with just pride) a pearl the size of a bullet, of remarkable sheen and as green as grass. It weighed fourteen grains, and afterwards sold for \$400.

A few years later, when the writer had hunted to some extent, no blame was ever attached to a non-committal reply from a pearl-hunter, when asked his luck.

The Cedar River, Iowa (or rather that section of it flowing through Floyd and Chickasaw Coun-

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ties), has yielded about three hundred pearls, varying from one-eighth to one-half inch in diameter, or from two to eighteen grains in weight. One collector in particular has sixty pearls that weigh  $211\frac{3}{4}$  grains—the two largest (button shape) weighing  $24\frac{1}{2}$  grains. They are of a ruby wine color and of matchless lustre.

Not long ago the writer found the largest pearl known to have been taken from the Upper Cedar River, Iowa. It was of the size of a hazelnut, spherical in shape, and weighed  $18\frac{3}{4}$  grains.

Pink, wine, violet, green and blue, with all the intermediate shades, are found in river gems.

The finest and, indeed, costliest pearls in the world are taken from a stream in Wisconsin. Pearls of a beautiful metallic green and possess-

❧ ❧ FRESH WATER PEARLS ❧ ❧

ing a superb lustre are peculiar to this little stream. Generally speaking, these pearls are worth about twice as much as first-class white specimens. Nothing found in the Orient approaches in beauty the superb green pearls of Wisconsin.

A perfect pearl should be of good color, fine lustre and shape (either ball, button or pear) to be marketable.

The transparent film that lies along the hinge contains only "spatter," "floater," or hinge "slugs"; often of nice color, but of little commercial account.

Pearls that become detached from the flesh are either lost out or fastened to the shell with a thin coating. In two or three years the contin-



A Pearl Fisher at Work.







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ued pressure from the inside forces the pearl nearly through, when the action of mud and water soon starts it to decay.

The up-to-date operator confines himself to more business-like methods than when the industry was young.

Carrying a camping outfit, good tent, etc., living in a true sportsmanlike style while at work, this form of work usually pays more than any other form of common labor, and when coupled with hunting and fishing, is a pleasant deviation from the regular outing with many campers; and although one may not be "on his luck," still he experiences that feeling of anticipation which always accompanies the undertaking.

No work on pearls would be complete without

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mention of Herman Myer, the Promoter of the Interior Pearl Fisheries of America; more generally known as the Pearl King, with headquarters at 41 and 43 Maiden Lane, New York City.

He has done more to advance the cause of American Pearl Fisheries than all other men combined.

Mr. Myer is a graduate of Harvard College, and a man thoroughly in love with his work, and he gives all his time and talent, money and brains to the work he so loves.

Many thousand pearl fishermen owe their well-lined pockets to the work of Mr. Myer in calling their attention to the search for pearls and persuading them to give it a trial. Sometimes it has been no easy task for him to intro-

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duce the work on a river where the presence of pearls has not previously been noted. Once begun, its own fascination and the large reward it gives, soon renders the work popular.

It is a rare treat to visit Mr. Myer's headquarters at 41 and 43 Maiden Lane, New York City, and see the choice pearls and exquisite pearl-work he has to exhibit in such vast numbers to his friends. It is related of him, that one day a reporter who was interviewing him, asked the question, "How many pearls have you?" To this question Mr. Myer gave no reply in words, but in his characteristic manner replied by deeds; and sending out for a gallon measure, poured box after box into it until it had been filled four times. He then showed, in addition to these four gallons,

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several of his rarest pearls separately. This is said to be the largest amount of pearls ever gathered together, and his collection is more remarkable for beauty than for size. Indeed, almost all the rare, unique and fine pearls found for years make their way to this collection. It is a saying of Mr. Myer's, that "I would like an opportunity to bid on every pearl found on Earth—many of them are not shown to me at first, and while I should prefer to pay the full value to the original owner, still, I am sure that nine out of ten American pearls will get to me sooner or later—I always pay one price for them—and *that* the full value."

His magnificent pearl, nearly one inch in diameter and perfect in all respects, is known as

❧ ❧ FRESH WATER PEARLS ❧ ❧

Myer's Beauty. It is said to be the largest absolutely perfect pearl in the world. Another of his treasures is an old necklace, consisting of over twenty thousand pearls, said to have been made for one of Napoleon's household; came into American hands after the shakeup at Waterloo, finally reaching Mr. Myer. The art and history of this magnificent necklace add to the attraction of its great beauty and value. Mr. Myer is proverbial for his courtesy and aid to beginners in pearl fishing and it would be well to write him, for you are sure of a prompt, courteous reply and all information it is in his power to give.

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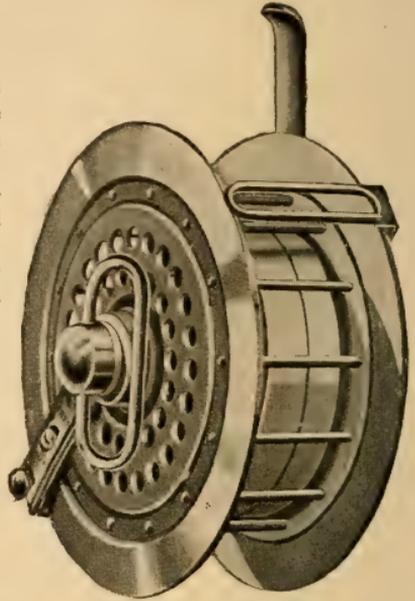
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