

to carry a heavy load of plantains to the *embarcadero*, was the consummation of all his wishes.

After a long discourse on the emptiness of human greatness, he drew from a leathern pouch a few very small opaque pearls, which he forced us to accept, enjoining us at the same time to note on our tablets that a poor shoemaker of Araya, but a white man, and of noble Castilian race, had been enabled to give us something which, on the other side of the sea,* was sought for as very precious. I here acquit myself of the promise I made to this worthy man, who disinterestedly refused to accept of the slightest retribution. The Pearl Coast presents the same aspect of misery as the countries of gold and diamonds, Choco and Brazil; but misery is not there attended with that immoderate desire of gain which is excited by mineral wealth.

The pearl-breeding oyster (*Avicula margaritifera*, Cuvier) abounds on the shoals which extend from Cape Paria to Cape la Vela. The islands of Margareta, Cubagua, Coche, Punta Araya, and the mouth of the Rio la Hacha, were, in the sixteenth century, as celebrated as were the Persian Gulf and the island of Taprobana among the ancients. It is incorrectly alleged by some historians that the natives of America were unacquainted with the luxury of pearls. The first Spaniards who landed in Terra Firma found the savages decked with pearl necklaces and bracelets; and among the civilized people of Mexico and Peru, pearls of a beautiful form were extremely sought after. I have published a dissertation on the statue of a Mexican priestess in basalt, whose head-dress, resembling the *calantica* of the heads of Isis, is ornamented with pearls. Las Casas and Benzoni have described, but not without some exaggeration, the cruelties which were exercised on the unhappy Indian slaves and negroes employed in the pearl fishery. At the beginning of the conquest the island of Coche alone furnished pearls amounting in value to fifteen hundred marks per month.

The *quint* which the king's officers drew from the produce of pearls, amounted to fifteen thousand ducats; which, according to the value of the precious metals in those times,

* 'Por alla,' or, 'del otro lado del charco,' (properly 'beyond,' or 'on the other side of the great lake'), a figurative expression, by which the people in the Spanish colonies denote Europe.