

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE
by Sister Giotto Moots

THE OYSTER

I am an oyster. My name is Margherita.

For years, I lived in the Persian Gulf on a piling in the waters eight fathoms deep, near the city of Sharjah on the Trucial Coast of Saudi Arabia. The richest pearl harvest of the gulf is taken from these waters that curve from the peninsula of Oman to that of Qatar.

My relatives and I clung to the piling for dear life. For a short time after I was born, I swam freely in the gulf waters for two or three weeks as a larva. After that time I cemented myself on the piling that became my home. Other larvae were not so fortunate. They did not find a secure place. They floated about for a while and then perished.

One might say that my relatives and I packed the piling. We lived so close together that one sneeze would shake us all.

By nature, we were bivalves, which means that we each had two shells united by a hinge. The left shell was attached to the piling. We each had a foot that could be extended to move the waters and then brought back inside, something like a turtle's head that can be extended and then brought back inside its body at will. We had gills with which to breathe. Our bodies were soft and enclosed by a mantle. It's the mantle that plays such an important part in my story.

Even though I am a hermaphrodite, which means I change sex from male to female and back again, I feel more like a girl most of the time since my gills make me look as if I'm wearing a pleated skirt. Water is pumped by my gills and this gives me food and oxygen. The rate of pumping of my gills is faster in summer when the waters are warm. My food consists of minute algae, particles of seaweed that float in the waters.

I also have a heart and arteries, even sinuses and veins. My heart beats at a rate of 15 to 24 beats a minute and slows down as the temperature drops. When I close my shell, as I often do, my heart beat drops to 2 or 3 times a minute regardless of the temperature. I also have an accessory heart which humans do not have. It beats independently of my main heart and agitates the blood within my mantle. I have sense organs that consist of a series of tentacles which readily respond to various stimuli.

I tell you all this to assure you I am a living creature.

One day, a speck of sand made its way deep within my mantle. Try as I might I couldn't get it out. I filled my gills with water and then relaxed them, but nothing I did could wash it out.

As I was trying, by kicking my foot and splashing the water, to rid myself of this speck (and it was just a speck) the oyster next to me, Hatchet Foot by name, became annoyed. He started splashing me in return. We had a regular battle going on. I could see that he wasn't going to stop. This hurt me deeply because we had been friends before this incident and now I was his enemy. We lived so close together we were cemented to the piling next to each other. There was no way I could escape. I tried to talk to him about it. I told him it was silly to quibble about some ripples of water. But he wouldn't listen, so I just drew myself in and became close-mouthed.

Years passed. I had forgiven him long ago, to no avail. What had once been a fine friendship had become a hissing and a dissing and a "don't bother me, sister, I'm

not your brother.” I decided I would tell no one about my sorrow. I didn’t want anyone else to know - first of all, because I thought I could handle the situation and secondly because I didn’t want anyone to think less of Hatchet-Foot. My relatives thought everything was just fine between us.

All the while, the speck inside me formed a sac and caused concentric circles of nacreous material to grow. The chief component of this nacreous material is aragonite, a mineral named after a province in Spain where it was first found. This sac lay deep inside my mantle, close to my heart. At first it felt strange and then it became a mysterious part of me. I dreamed about what it was and what it would be. In fact, it gradually contained all my dreams. In my meditation and contemplation, it became my inspiration and imagination, my elation, wonder and joy. I felt I could not live without it, that it was the best part of me. I began to rejoice every day in its presence; and every night as the waters lapped against the piling with the moon playing with the tides, it lay snug and comforting inside me.

All of a sudden, a new ripple of impending danger spread through the waters until it reached our piling. My relatives were silent as we all waited. We closed our shells and our heart beats went down to 2 or 3 times a minute.

Pearl divers were working the area. They work in pairs. One man remains in the boat at the surface of the water. He attends the two lines that are used to lower and raise his partner. One line is used to carry a 40-lb. stone to bring the diver down with baskets to hold the oysters he gathers. The second line serves as a signal cord. The diver stays below for 60 to 80 seconds and then signals to be brought up.

We knew they were near. We knew we couldn’t hide or swim away. We were caught; they had seen us. My heart sank within me. I knew I would die to the life I had known.

Just then, Hatchet-foot leaned towards me and said, “I’m sorry Margherita, I was wrong. I shouldn’t have held a grudge so long. Forgive me.”

How strange: just at the moment I was dying, my heart leapt for joy.

In an instant I felt myself torn from the piling I had clung to for so long. Hatchet-Foot was gone. I was being raised up in a basket to the surface of the water. In a second my shell was cracked open. My shell, my mantle and everything that had given me identity were thrown into the gulf, into the deep.

The sac that lay next to my heart was all that was left of me. I realized for the first time that it was my true self. I felt so free, so light. I was a living soul. The sun was shining, it was spring. I was living in a new world of wonder.

It wasn’t long before I arrived in the Iranian port of Lingeh. I was still unaware of the beauty within me.

THE MERCHANT

Overlooking the city of Lingeh, where the finest pearls are gathered, was the palace of a merchant man by the name of Michou the Magnificent.

He lived a languishing, leisurely life of luxury. In his palace hung fabrics of lavender, magenta and indigo, all with paisley patterns. The walls were covered with mosaic tiles of lapis lazuli. On the buffet that had rich inlays of wood and bone, lay

plump, purple plums in a ceramic bowl. The ogee arches led to cool gardens of pomegranates and peacocks. Michou wallowed in wealth as panegyric hymns of praise wafted into his palace through the windows setting the penaches, that is, ornamental plumes of feathers, playing in the breeze. Every movement of servant or savant was of lilt and uplifting loveliness

Michou had won his fortune by fair and favored means. He was an honest man and respected by the local pearl merchants who knew him. They were called Margaritarii. Michou was admired by them for his expertise in the field of pearl selection and marketing. His keen and trained eye discovered the finest pearls and then sold them. He was a merchants' merchant.

He knew that the name "true pearl" was used only to describe the cyst or sac pearl composed predominantly of nacre, that is, mother of pearl. It is formed free and not attached in any way to the shell. He knew the true pearl was characterized by its lustre and by a delicate play of surface color called its orient. He knew that technically the salt-water mollusks most important in natural pearl production are of the genus Meleagrina, better known as Margaritifera. This type alone yields the most highly prized of all true pearls, the oriental pearl called Oriental Pearl Oyster Meleagrina.

He knew that where he lived near the Persian Gulf, the finest pearls were found but also pearls of fine quality were fished from pearl banks up the gulf off the island of Bahrain. Other sources included pearls from the Bay of Bengal near Ceylon marketed in Madras. Also marketed in Madras were pearls taken from the banks off the island of Zanzibar to Inhambane in Mozambique. Since the days of the Ptolemies, pearls had been fished in the Red Sea. Other sources were the Celebes in Southeast Asia, the Australian waters and the islands of the South Pacific. In the Americas, salt-water pearls were found in the Caribbean, in the Gulf of California and the Gulf of Mexico. He knew that freshwater pearls were found in the Mississippi River and that the most famous of all American pearls was the pink "Queen Pearl" weighing 93 pearl grains or 23 1/4 carats found at Notch brook near Paterson, N.J., in the year 1857. It was purchased by Tiffany, the famous New York jewelry store, passed to a French gem dealer and sold to the French empress Eugenie. Fresh water pearls were also found in Great Britain, Scotland, Wales and central Europe, especially Bavaria.

As to the history of pearling, he knew that China had been pearling since 2000 B.C. In China, pearls were items used in the paying of taxes. He knew that an unblemished pearl is one of the most ancient symbols of perfection - that Pliny spoke of pearls as "the richest merchandise of all and the most sovereign commodity in the whole world." He knew so much about pearls, he could write a book.

Michou was lonely. He was so wealthy, he trusted no one. Sometimes he wandered from room to room, out into the garden and back again in search of some purpose or some cause, or some place, or some one, or some love or just some thing. Sometimes when he passed the buffet he would pluck a plum and go out into the garden again. Sometimes, he would take a silk handkerchief from the pocket that lay over his heart and wipe his eyes. His handkerchief had an exquisite edging but the center was devoid of design. It made a statement about his lonely life. At night, he could hardly sleep: his search for some thing gave him insomnia.

So when a messenger arrived saying that a new shipment of pearls had come into port, he hurried to the city of Lingeh.

THE PEARL

Margherita was in the hands of an experienced workman named Cos who had gently broken open the sac and had extracted the pearl within. He polished it with a soft cloth so that its beauty radiated. He knew immediately that this was the prize that would secure his fortune and his future. This pearl was the most beautiful he had ever seen. He had sent a messenger to Michou to tell him to come at once.

Michou hustled his way through the streets of Lingeh. He climbed the stairs to Cos' jewelry shop on the second floor. Down below, the souk droned on with its daily endeavor.

Cos was calm and well prepared. He set the pearl against a black velvet cloth to show its lustre. Michou was out of breath by the time he arrived, so when he saw the pearl he gasped for air. Was it his lack of breath or the pearl's beauty? He pretended it was his breath.

The moment should have been serene, but high tension reigned.

He looked again and realized everything he ever knew about fine pearls was contained in this one beauty, its iridescence, its translucence, its mysterious lustrous center, indescribable in its playful charm, a pure and gleaming marvel. Ah, he sighed, and his whole being melted. He knew the pearl. He had searched for her all his life. She was so light, so bright, his heart leapt for joy. It skipped over the mountains and took flight in the sky. Margherita blushed, which added to the delicate play of surface color she already possessed.

"All right, Cos, what's the cost?" he said.

Cos lowered his eyes. He had him.

The declaration of the cost brought Michou back to earth, for he must sell all his possessions to buy the pearl. At the same time, he realized he would never sell this pearl. In Margherita he had found his soul. He looked at her again with longing and left.

When the deal was done, Michou was bereft of his pompous possessions. He took the pearl, wrapped it in his silk handkerchief and placed it in the pocket that lay over his heart. I will name her Margherita, he said, and his heart began to sing.

THE MONK

Michou joined a local ashram and committed himself to a guru for a year's instruction in living a spiritual life. After this time he made a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience to the will of God as manifested in his life.

He chose to live on uninhabited land in a clearing of the forest near a lake of limpid and luminous waters. He built himself a small dwelling of the trees that stood nearby. At the opposite end from the entrance to the house was a large fireplace that kept him warm in winter and where he did his cooking except in summer, when he used an outside grilled pit. Logs were chopped and stacked on the porch next to the entrance. The door of his home faced east.

The floor was made of tamped earth treated with ox blood. It became a surface,

deep-red in color with a matte shine, easy to sweep and clean. On this surface he placed his woven wool prayer rug that he himself had made. It was a perfect square with a large circle of green earth in the center. The earth contained small flowers of varied colors distributed evenly throughout. He sat on it in the lotus position, hands upturned to accept the grace of God as he prayed for enlightenment. When he placed his hand over his pocket and felt the presence of Margherita, his heart would sing.

For food, he depended on his skill as a fisherman and the produce of his vegetable garden. Fruit came from a few trees he cultivated nearby and he harvested honey from a beehive. Milk for cheese was supplied by two sheep that also kept the clearing cleared. He learned all the tricks of processing and storing food. He boiled his water after drawing it from the lake. For it was the lake that supplied him with water for his sanitary needs. In the lake he played and swam and bathed and washed his clothes. In the summer, in the dark of night as he floated on the waters he watched the moon as it danced among the clouds or stood still and full, watching him.

For clothing, in summer, he wore a light-weight linen shirt and white cotton pants. In winter, wool from his sheep supplied the material for a long and full mantle.

When he first wove it, he put it on and danced around the room. The mantle formed white undulating waves as he moved about the room in a state of utter joy. Margherita rejoiced with him. In him, she had found a new mantle and a loving heart. At night, as he fell asleep on layers of sheep's wool and pulled his mantle over him, he thanked God for the animals that supplied him with so much warmth. Next to his home he had built a shelter for them. They were his only daily companions.

At a nearby village, about three miles away, he went twice a week to help at a local hostel, to cook and care for the elderly. There he opened up his heart and told them about his life on the clearing in the forest, a full rich life of nature's way in the wild. The villagers loved him and called him Michou the Monk. It was at this time that he sold some of his woven cloth and, in summer, produce from his vegetable garden. With the money, he bought the few things he needed that he could not make.

Now that Michou was on a spiritual path, in the East called The Way, every nuance of each season opened up to him. He began to write.

This was just the beginning. Margherita filled the void in his life as she made his heart sing.

He had exchanged opulence for opalescence.

THE PARABLE

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant's search for fine pearls. When he found one really valuable pearl, he went back and put up for sale all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13:45