

ELECTRA:

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BELLES LETTRES MONTHLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

MAY, 1883, TO MAY, 1884.

"The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth who bore through snow and ice
A banner with this strange device,
EXCELSIOR!"

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ELECTRA:

A BELLES LETTRES MONTHLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

VOL. I.

OCTOBER, 1883.

No. 6.

OCTOBER.

Fair buds of promise have yielded their treasure,
Autumn has crowned all the bountiful year,
Filling with plenty the o'erflowing measure,
Glad'ning our hearts with its fruit and its cheer;
Beautiful, golden October is here.

Nature may wear garments gorgeous or sober;
Snow-drifts or blossoms may cover the earth;
Spring's dainty buds, or the leaves of October,
Still we *may* gather sweet garlands of worth
From even the gloom of earth's desolate dearth.

ATOLLS.

The hardy seaman, as he breasts the waves of the Indian or South Pacific sea, following one of those great thoroughfares of commerce that have been ploughed by thousands of keels before him, comes ever and anon to a singular natural phenomenon. Upon the broad open sea, where the water is a thousand fathoms deep, and no land of continent or island has for days or even weeks been in sight, he discovers a long line of foam breaking upon a narrow ledge of white stone that glistens in the sun. As he comes nearer he perceives that the ledge is only a few yards, or at most a

few rods in breadth. It rises at no point more than a few feet above the water's edge. Its upper surface has a margin of low green foliage, while here and there groups of cocoanut palms, bananas, or bread-fruit trees lift their tall fronds toward the sky. For miles and miles this narrow ledge of white, with its green border and its sentinel palms, stretches away on either hand. Its sweep is that of a graceful curve, which either brings the two ends together and unites them on the distant horizon, so as to inclose a circle of many miles in diameter, or rounds off to the far horizon

on either hand, so as to show that a much larger circle—one of many leagues in diameter—is walled in from the ocean by this strange and verdure-crowned dyke.

As the massive inclosing wall is broken ordinarily only at a single point, and that to leeward of the trade-winds and the ocean-storms, it follows that however tempestuous the sea may be without this charmed inclosure, within is unbroken quietude and unruffled calm. Under the tall cocoanut palm that overshadows the ledge the native Maldive builds his hut, and while to seaward the never-ceasing roar of the surf is in his ear, and the white spray forever lifted with rainbow tints toward the sky, within the charmed circle of his *atoll*, or *atollon* as he calls it, his frail bark canoe sleeps as quietly as on some inland lake. In the interstices of the rocks which the fury of the tempest has broken and strewn upon the ledge, the wild sea-fowl build their nests and rear their young—and over the quiet waters of the lagoon the fledglings make first essay of their wings ere they put forth to sea. And here, when the mariner's vessel is disabled, or the fury of the tempest is upon him, he runs his ship in through the single gate that leads to the sea, and, securely anchored as in a quiet haven, "rides through the terrors of an equatorial storm."

You will readily agree with me that there is nothing more wonderful, more beautiful, more interesting than these atolls or atollons of the South Seas, lying so thickly strewn along the great thoroughfares of East Indian and Australian commerce.

They are wonderful first of all as to their origin; for this Titanic wall—in comparison with which the dykes of Holland and the great wall of China are but as the work of pigmies—this adamantine buttress, rising thousands of

feet in height and hundreds of miles in length out of the bosom of the tempestuous ocean, "humbling man's most gigantic buildings into insignificance by the contrast," is all the work of a tiny sea-polyp scarcely more than visible to the naked eye—a soft, gelatinous, fragile-looking creature that the first wave that beat upon it might be expected to destroy, and yet the successful builders of massive structures that dot the seas as Archipelagoes—as islands leagues in circumference, as ledges hundreds of miles in length, or as atolls inclosing in their lagoons many square miles of sea.

A little insignificant polyp extracts from the sea-water the lime that has been brought down from mountain ranges by the rivers, and carried by ocean currents to its door, and with these secretions piles its lofty structures that withstand the ocean in its wildest rage, and serve as the bases of islands and continents for the habitation of the races of men.

These atolls are wonderful also as to their history. It is a well-ascertained fact in natural history that the coral insect can not live at a depth of more than a few fathoms beneath the surface of the sea. As you look down there and see the white wall gleaming as far down as the eye can follow, and as you let down the plummet and find it still striking against the perpendicular face of the wall, when you have reached many hundreds of fathoms, you know that those foundations that lie so far below, and upon which the coral structure rests, must have been once very near the surface of the sea. In the shallow water the wall was begun, and brought up to the water's edge; but there was a gradual subsidence of the underlying floor. Inch by inch it subsided, and layer by layer the atoll builders increased the height of their dam, so as to keep even up to the water's edge, until, as the ages

on, the deep foundations were far
 amidst the silent, uninhabitable
 depths, but the patient toilers were at
 the surface, in the sunshine, happy in
 their toil.

Here, then, is a chapter from the his-
 tory of those far-gone days, when what
 are now high mountains were beneath
 the waters of the sea, and what are now
 great ocean-depths were flowery islands
 or portions of continental mains.

The atolls are wonderful again in their
 combination of beauty and strength.
 Professor Dana compares them in their
 landscape beauty to "garlands thrown
 upon the sea." But this surface beauty
 is as nothing compared with that which
 rewards a look into the crystal depths
 beneath the quiet surface of the lagoon.

The atoll builders who have kept the
 inclosing walls level with the sea, have
 also kept the floor within, up to a point
 at which it is easily visible. This floor
 is of purest white, composed of carbon-
 ate of lime deposited by coral remains
 that have fallen, disintegrated from the
 walls, and have become solidified into
 firm, white stone. And now above this
 marble floor we have nature's elaborate
 aquarium, or, as has been more proper-
 ly said, her beautiful "garden of the
 sea."

Here along the upper tiers of the en-
 circling walls are the living masses of
 coral—the tireless builders still at work,
 their bright, variegated colors flashing
 in the sunlight with all the hues of the
 rainbow. Beneath this living wall, con-
 stituting its deep foundation, is the white
 coral framework after the living creature
 has passed away. What exquisite forms
 of beauty—the "graceful meandrina,"
 the "domed astrea," the branching
 madrepora, and the other multitudinous
 forms that make the stem-work of these
 submarine flowers. And then the flow-
 ers themselves; what tongue can describe
 the beauty of "the gorgeous sea anem-

one, with colors brighter and contrasts
 richer than those of gaudiest tulips or
 gayest peony," as it clings to the crev-
 ices of the coral wall, its rich hues con-
 trasting with the pure white from which
 it depends; or, "the beds of starry
 forms, some small, others large, the
 daisies and dahlias of the place"—
 "branching masses reaching to the very
 surface of the water, with tints of
 orange, yellow, red, and pale blue;"
 "beautiful parterres of branching, round-
 ed, flat, or leafy masses of colors, yellow,
 orange, gray, and gold;" "fish of gaudi-
 est colors moving gracefully from point to
 point, browsing upon the live coral, as
 cattle upon the daisies in a mountain
 meadow." No wonder that poetic fancy
 has peopled these coral groves with sea-
 nymphs and fairy creatures too beautiful
 for any less favored portion of this dull,
 cold earth on which we dwell.

But these atolls are interesting also for
 the lessons of instruction they have for
 us in reference to our daily life. If
 Agur, the son of Jakeh, had been a sea-
 farer, he might have added to his list
 of things which are "exceeding wise,"
 these little toilers of the sea; and Solo-
 mon, if he had ever visited the South
 Seas, might have followed his "Go to
 the ant thou sluggard," with a "Go to
 the coral-polyp, thou laggard," for there
 are at least two lessons of life which
 these little workers impress most vividly
 upon us.

The first is a lesson of victory over
 adverse circumstances in life. Go with
 me to the windward side of the atoll.
 Let us stand where the surf is beating
 day and night with reverberating thun-
 der; where the sea is ever dashing with
 ceaseless but impotent wrath upon the
 living wall. Look down now as you
 great wave recedes! What is that cling-
 ing in apparent helplessness to the per-
 pendicular face, exposed to the merciless
 assault of each advancing wave? A soft,

gelatinous substance, it would seem that the lightest wave might wash it away; and yet, when the boisterous surge has broken with a shock that would have dashed the mightiest ship to atoms, our little toiler not only remains uninjured, but out of the very wave that has beaten so pitilessly it has extracted the elements of its own consolidation and development. A few days more of this stormy warfare, and what was once a pulpy mass that the hand of a child could have crushed, is now a mass of stone, as exquisite of structure, as delicate of chiselling as some masterpiece of the sculptor's art, as strong as it is beautiful, as enduring as the everlasting hills. And so the man whose lot is cast on the windward side of fortune, whose mission it is to buffet the waves of adversity in their ceaseless flow, may with the help of God not only successfully withstand their fury, but wrest from them the very elements of patient endurance, manly fortitude, and high-souled courage, which give to character unfading beauty and immortal strength.

The second lesson lies in a different direction. If without the atoll all is

stir and commotion, within is a quiet which to many may be suggestive of stagnation. And so, around us are many who lag, not because the waves are high and the storm is fierce, but because their lot is cast in seclusion, and they see not what great thing there is to do. Go then and look down into the quiet depths of the lagoon, observe those forms of exquisite symmetry and beauty, and learn that in the most quiet walks of life there are beauties of character to develop, graces to cultivate, a modest sphere to fill, life's quiet pathway to adorn with flowers; and though only a stray vessel passes here and there, and only a chance eye look down with wonder and admiration now and then, there is an infinite Eye that always sees. Whether up amidst the play of the bright sunshine, or far down amongst the shadows of the deep, deep sea, that life is a grand life, worthy of the angels of God, which has been so lived that to "faith has been added virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge temperance, to temperance patience, to patience godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity."

CELEBRITIES.

A group of bright-eyed critics
Are looking at famous men;
Those who have won their laurels,
Must run the gauntlet again.

"Girls, pray, who may this be?"
"You goosie, do n't you know?
He wrote a book—or something,
Ever so long ago."

"This is an Irishman, surely."
"Now, Amy, you're over bold;
That was David Livingstone,
Before he grew nice and old."

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