

# A Pearl of Price

by Raymond S. Spears

FRED MEALIN was tonging for button-shells at the Wittsburg Ford, on the St. Francis River, when he raked up a shell of large size and unusual shape. It was light in color, with something of the shape of a butterfly-wing, and weighing about seventeen ounces. The fisher turned it over in his hands, and tossed it into the stern of his scow for later examination. Then he continued his tonging, little thinking that the shell which he handled so carelessly held within it a whole Pandora's box of trouble.

Singing as he worked, Mealin gathered in his stint of fifteen hundredweight of mussel-shells, and then hoisted his anchors to let the green current carry him down stream to his boiling-pan and tent. At the landing he shoveled the shells into the pan, built a fire under it, and then built another fire in his cook-stove. At this point he recalled the butterfly-shell, and brought it up to the tent, where a minute's contact with the stove opened wide the bivalve's shell. Within was a pale meat. The pearler poked into the mass with his knife, and far under it, next to the hinge of the shell, he found something hard and movable.

"A slug, I reckon!" he muttered.

Wrenching open the shell, he plucked out the meat, and found, beneath it, what made him spring to his feet and gasp. It was a round pearl, as large as the end of his thumb. He seized it between thumb and finger, sprang to the tent-flap, and let the sun shine upon the jewel. It was the color of a rose, and within was a tiny flame of fire, which played from side to side as he rolled it across his palm, looking

fearfully for the flaw that makes the difference between slugs and pearls of great price.

"My lan'! My lan'!" he gasped to himself. "I never yearn of sech a trick as that! Two thousan' dollars!"

He shrank back into the tent, lest the forest of gum and cypress on the opposite side of the river might have prying eyes in it. He tied down the flap of his tent, drew his rusty revolver from his old trunk, and turned the cylinder to see that it would still shoot. He looked for a place to put the pearl, but neither the trunk nor the ground nor a pocket seemed safe. He finally sewed it up in a little sack, and slung it next to his skin.

He thought of starting instantly for Memphis, to sell his find, but native thrift held him back. What could he do with his tent, which cost thirty dollars, with his pile of shells, worth forty, and with his outfit of scow, tongs, lines, and pan, worth perhaps fifteen? These he could not leave.

That afternoon he cleaned his catch of shells, and the next morning paddled down to the Long Stillwater, where the shell-buyers congregated. Here he told what he had to sell—how many tons of shells he had, and where they were. A buyer bid them in for thirty-nine dollars, and went up with a gasoline launch and shell-barge to get them. Night found the pearler sold out, shells, tent, pan, and all, for shell-buyers do a little trade in supplies on the side.

"Going out of business?" the buyer said. "Found a big un?"

"No—no! " Mealin gasped, afraid some one would guess his secret.

The buyer read the truth.

"Let's see it—come now!" he urged. "Mebbe I can tell you what you'd ought to git for it."

Mealin, knowing his own ignorance, saw the sense of this, and showed his pearl to the buyer.

"Gracious!" the man exclaimed, reaching toward it, but the finder slipped it back into the little pouch. "It's worth thousands!"

Mealin returned to the Stillwater, and there bought a skiff to go down the river to Helena. While he was yet in sight of the shell-buyers' headquarters, word that he had made a find had passed to many an ear. In the twilight, two men slipped down the river in a dugout, pursuing. They had heard the pearl was worth ten thousand dollars, and they wanted it.

Bill Brones and Dan Petterson were old Mississippi "river-rats." They knew Mealin, and they believed he was more cowardly than themselves. All that afternoon and evening they drove their paddles deep into the water, in chase of him; and toward midnight, a ripple down a long eddy told them that some one was rowing there. They knew he would not stop for the night having so much in his possession.

Just ahead, the river entered a long reach of unbroken forest. Miles down in the brake they overtook the man, who had been rowing in a cold sweat, knowing that strangers were sharing the river with him. As they came alongside his boat, he spoke in a trembling voice:

"Evenin', gemmen!"

"Howdy!" they answered, and Mealin turned sharply toward the bank.

"Huh! Where you-all goin'?" they demanded.

"Theh's—theh's a camp yeah!" he answered feebly.

The two knew it was a lie, and they drove their dugout rasping along the side of the skiff. As Mealin sprang to his feet, they seized him and dragged him down. Too late he reached for his revolver—Brones had it, and smashed him in the face with the butt. They went through his pockets, and found his pocketbook with a few soft bills in it. They ran their hands over his clothes seeking the little lump—and found it over his heart. They tore open his clothes and took the treasure. Bill clutched it, and put the string over his own head, uttering a guttural cry of triumph.

They kicked in the thin sides of the skiff, reentered their dugout, and drove on down the stream. Mealin came to at daybreak, and discovered that his pearl was gone, as well as his money. He wasted some tears and curses, and then went back to pearling and shell-fishing. Next day, the two river-pirates hid out in a cane-brake, each watching the other—one guarding against a blow on the head, the other against desertion by his partner, who carried the gem. That night they drove down the St. Francis and entered the Mississippi. Here their dugout was but a fleck upon the vast waters, and when they were below Helena, they knew they were safe from pursuit.

"What'll we do with it?" Petterson asked, awed by the lambent flame within the tiny ball. "Hit's shore a bustin' big un!"

"Sell hit! Sell hit! Ten thousand dollars!" Bill Brones laughed.

"But whar?" Petterson asked again.

"Vicksburg—Baton Rouge—N'Orleans—anywhar!" the bigger thief laughed, again rubbing the gem in his hands, Petterson reached to take the trinket, but Brones drew back. "Cyar-ful!" he growled menacingly. "You mout drap hit!"

Petterson drew back, his eyes flaring. He was not strong enough to resent

his partner's greed openly; but Brones saw his anger, and carefully put the pearl back in the little sack. Thereafter he did not turn his back to Petterson while paddling—in fact, he changed seats, taking the stern himself.

At Modoc Landing they bought some tobacco and food with the money they had stolen with the pearl. Then for two days they paddled and floated ceaselessly, for neither dared sleep. Finally, in Milliken's Bend, Brones perfected a little scheme.

"Hit won't be me killin' 'im!" he said to himself. "I won't be to blame if he cayn't swim out. Hit'll be jes hisn's own keerlessness if he don' git aout!"

It was starlight, and nearing midnight. Over the water a few shreds of fog rolled and flew. On the left the lumping of a caving bank sometimes broke the stillness. Far ahead, the glare of Vicksburg's electric-lights was reflected in the sky.

Brones slipped out of his coat and loosened the laces of his shoes. Then, feeling the little sack under his throat, he leaned to the left and dived slowly into the water, upsetting the canoe as he did so. He swam far under the water, and when he came to the surface at last, he listened for any sound from behind him. He heard nothing and saw nothing.

Quietly he struck across the current, and an hour later landed below the transfer-dock. Standing on the bank, he looked at the river for a long time, shivering in the coolness. He saw dark objects out on the water, and some of them seemed to have faces and eyes. At length he turned toward the city, and on the water-front he found a welcome in a shanty-boat—Carney Hill's *Klondike*, already known to Brones.

Brones drank liquor to keep himself from catching cold, and the more he drank

the more talkative he became. He began to boast that he was a rich man, but when Hill asked him where he got his wealth, he was shrewd enough not to say. He did say, however, that he had come out of the St. Francis. Hill guessed the rest. When Brones was stupefied, the shanty-boater discovered the little sack and saw the gem. He cackled a queer laugh. Replacing the pearl with a musket-ball, he carried Brones up the wharf to a pile of cotton-bales, and there left him asleep.

"I'd oughter kill 'im," Hill thought to himself. "Brones'll shore be plumb mad when he finds his little hunk of sunset turned blue! But he won't know—huh!"

Hill dropped out the mouth of the Yazoo and floated on down the Mississippi. Three weeks later he landed at New Orleans, and went to a little shop up in the French quarter. Here a dapper little Creole asked what did he have to sell now—candlesticks or plate?

Hill showed the pearl, and the dealer in curios let out an involuntary cry. He touched it, smelt it, rubbed it with his tongue. He offered a hundred dollars—two hundred—five hundred; but Hill laughed easily.

"I want two thousan' dollars for it!" he demanded. "No less!"

The Frenchman had long dealt with river-men. He bought anything from second-hand shanty-boats to jewelry, antiques, and old books. He laughed, gesticulated, and slowly raised his offers until, late in the day, he got up to seventeen hundred and fifty dollars.

"Na mair! Na mair!" he said.

Hill protested, haggled, and threatened to go, but without avail. Finally, he accepted the money in hand, and the pearl was off the Mississippi for good.

The little Frenchman had an interest in a store on Canal Street—a store where

there was a mixture of real antiques, trinkets, and curios. It had a few regular customers whom the Frenchman always kept in mind when shanty-boaters came to his other place with the treasures of the river. He thought, now, of a young New York broker, a Mardi Gras visitor, who wanted something novel, something different, every time he came.

The Frenchman had a very pretty bit of gold spinning which had come from down in Guatemala. There were some pretty stones woven into the fabric of gold threads and links, but it needed a pendant larger and better than the Indians had been able to give it. In the beautiful pearl from the St. Francis, the Frenchman had a jewel which exactly suited the strange, shell-like pattern of the gold-weavers. With his own hands he substituted it for a cheaper gem, and one glance showed that he had done well.

A few weeks later, the young man came, looking less young than before, and thinner-jawed, perhaps. The price of the

pretty ornament staggered him, but he shrugged his shoulders and paid it. For a minute, he had the supreme joy of seeing pure delight in the eyes of a beautiful girl who was with him; but glancing from the pearl to his face, she seemed to ask a question which he dared not answer.

Two months later, in the same column of a newspaper, the little Frenchman found two paragraphs of personal interest to him. One told of a fight on a shanty-boat in Putney's Bend, in which one Carney Hill, a noted river-junker, had been killed by a river-rat named Brones. Brones, who was arrested, claimed that Hill had robbed him of a valuable pearl. The other item was an account of the suicide of a young New York broker, owing to financial difficulties, and—so rumor said—to the fact that his fiancée had returned his gifts.

"*Hehn!*" the frenchman said to himself. "Ah wondair who get dat pearl now? Two good customair gone in one day! *Hehn*, business is bad!"