

GOLD COINAGE, AND ITS CURIOSITIES.

Distant as the Californian diggings are from New York and from London, the diggers find abundant customers for their gold-dust. Silver dollars are sent out to San Francisco, in exchange for the dust and the ore; and the magnificent steamers of the Atlantic route bring us as much of this gold as the course of exchange between the countries requires.

Among the many modes of practically applying gold, *money* is not the least curious and interesting. The substances of which money is composed are more numerous than many persons imagine. When society rises above the level of mere bartering transactions, any substance which is equally valued by buyer and seller may become money; and there then arises simply a question of degree, as to the fitness of one or another material. One of the earliest kinds of money was *cattle*, an article being valued at so many oxen; but this is obviously a coin that is inapplicable to small purchasers, for it would puzzle the seller to give change out of an ox. *Shells* are used to a great extent as money, in India, the Indian islands, and Africa; the cowry shells of India have a value of about thirty-two to an English farthing. *Cocoa-nuts*, *almonds*, and *maize* have all had to do duty as money, in certain times and countries. In hunting countries, *skins* are a very common kind of coin; and stamped pieces of *leather* are said to have been used in England in the time of Edgar. In some regions *sal* is used as money, cut into convenient brick-shaped pieces. In countries where rents and wages are estimated in given quantities of *corn*, corn may be said to be money, *Dried fish* is often the money of Iceland and Newfoundland; *sugar* has at times been a West-India money; and Adam Smith tells us of a Scotch village in which *nails* were a current coin at the ale-house and the baker's. But metals supersede all the above heterogeneous list, in a more advanced state of society. *Brass* money was made in Ireland during the time of the Tudors; and at the same period *lead* was used for small coins in England. Charles the Second had farthings of *tin*; and his successor had small coins of *pewter* and of *gun-metal*. *Iron* was used by some of the early nations; and *platinum* is used at the present day in Russia.

It appears, therefore, that, besides silver and copper, gold has many rivals as materials for coins. All yield precedence to it, however; for no other metal possesses at once so many qualities fitted for this purpose. It is very solid and dense; it is divisible or separable in an extraordinary degree; it is very little affected by air or moisture, or ordinary usage; its supply is (relatively) very limited; and its value presents a remarkable approach to uniformity, in different countries and different times.

Our modern potentates, in England at least, have no trouble to obtain gold for coining; bullion dealers, in the ordinary course of their trade, voluntarily bring gold to the Mint to be coined. But such was not always the case, in earlier times, nor is it now always the case, in other countries; for the rulers thought it incumbent on them to place some check upon the locomotive propensities of gold. Sometimes gold was not allowed to be sent out of the country; sometimes a bonus was offered to the holders of gold, to permit it to be coined; and sometimes an interdict was put against the use of gold for trinkets and ornaments.

Perhaps the most intense gold-fever the world has known—not so widely spread, perhaps, but more deep than that of California—was *alchemy*. When