

industry, and the facts which it discloses are sufficiently remarkable. The figures show that for a period of nearly forty years the quantity of the article exported and the prices obtained for it have, notwithstanding many and large fluctuations, constantly increased, until from a total of 1,440 tons in the year 1856, at a value of £13 per ton, a total of between 8,000 and 9,000 tons was reached in the year 1892, at a value of £46 10s. to £73 10s. per ton—or, say, an average of £58 10s. per ton, being an increase six-fold in quantity and four-and-a-half-fold in price.

These facts point to a very largely increased demand in Europe and America, which has been able to absorb a constantly increasing quantity of the article at a higher price, and to a great increase in the number of diggers on the gumfields, induced by the higher price commanded by the product.

The question of course arises, How long and to what extent is this expansion in the demand, the supply, and the price of the article likely to continue? It is certain that the gum is now only obtained with much more labour than was the case some years ago. In the early days, gum of fine quality was readily found in large lumps, in many cases scarcely needing the use of the short spike set on a wooden handle which used to do duty for a spear. But as this "bold" gum became scarcer, and the article had to be searched for at a greater depth, the long spears of later times came into use; and now the scarcity of the gum has become such that, except in swampy ground, the use of the spear seems to be almost abandoned, and the diggers are beginning to find it necessary to dig in a more systematic manner, paddocking out the ground as they go, so as once for all to exhaust its contents. The gum, moreover, which is now obtained is very much smaller in size than formerly, and pieces which, as the witnesses say, would not formerly "have been looked at" are now brought to market. By a lax mode of speaking this diminution in size of the pieces is often spoken of as a deterioration in quality. This is misleading. The small pieces, presenting a larger surface, have more waste to get rid of, but the inner part is in no way deteriorated in quality. A sack of small gum is only inferior to a sack of "bold" because it contains less good gum; but the good gum is as good as ever it was. This is the general testimony of the witnesses, and was specially asserted by one who had long been a varnish-maker in London; but on the other hand we are told by one gentleman that the "bold" gum is urgently asked for by American varnish-makers, who say that it melts lighter in colour than the small.

Upon these facts, either of two diverse events might conceivably happen: (1.) The supply of gum may diminish, which would naturally be attended by a rise in price. (2.) The output might for some time be largely increased by a great influx of diggers, or by new deposits of gum being found and worked, in which case the price would probably fall. But this part of the subject will receive further consideration when we come to the question of the probability of a large influx of diggers.

The probable duration of the gum industry is a question on which the most diverse opinions are expressed, some giving it a very short date, and others taking the more optimistic view that the gumfields will not be exhausted in the lifetime of any young man now living. Little can be said on this point beyond guesswork; but the indications which we have already described are positive reasons for expecting that at no very distant date, unless new ground is opened, there may be a very decided falling-off in the quantity of gum produced, or that this result will only be averted by the harder toil of a larger number of men, who will, of course, have to be content with smaller earnings. With regard to available new ground we have no definite evidence to justify an opinion, but there is good reason to think that there are below the gum now being worked deeper layers, the result of older deposits, and that in many of the known swamps there exists a much larger quantity of gum than has ever been taken out of them. If this gum, as seems to be the case, is lying among and under the timber which is the remnant of an old kauri-forest, it cannot be got at by the spear or hook, or in any way but by the drainage of the swamps. Perhaps this may hereafter be done by the co-operation of the diggers, if by means of any regulations hereafter to be made the area so drained could be conserved to the use of those who combine to do the work, in the same manner as is done on goldfields.

Closely connected with the question of the probable duration of the gum itself is that relating to its position considered as an article of commerce. The extraordinary increase in the price, notwithstanding a steadily increasing supply, has been already mentioned, and it may safely be said that such an expansion of the trade would have appeared very unlikely to a dealer of thirty years ago. It would no doubt be hazardous to predict that the price will go on increasing in the future as it has done in the past, and, on the other hand, it would be premature to regard a sudden fall in the price, such as has occurred since our inquiry was set on foot, as necessarily indicating a permanent retrogression of the demand. The elements by a consideration of which such a question must be determined are the demand for the articles in the preparation of which kauri-gum is now used, chiefly varnishes of a good quality, and the probability of any other gum-resin competing seriously with kauri in the market.

In this connection we think that some particulars of the gums used in varnish-making may be of interest. For these we avail ourselves of a work published in 1891 by Mr. Ingham Clarke, F.L.S. and F.R.G.S., an eminent London varnish-maker. He says:—

"The total annual imports of varnish-gums into England, a part of which is re-exported, amount to about 4,000 tons, nearly two-thirds being represented by the kauri-gum of New Zealand. About 400 tons came from our West African colony of Sierra Leone; 400 or 500 tons from the Philippine and adjacent islands (usually known as Manila gum), and the remainder from various parts of the world.

"The 'gum animé,' exported from Zanzibar, is a high-class gum, but very limited in quantity, and is worth in London from £200 to £350 per ton. The Manila gums are so like the kauri-gum in appearance that it is almost impossible at sight to distinguish them, the greatest adepts being able to do so by the sense of smell only. The Manila gums have all some tricky characteristic, which causes trouble to manufacturers even months after the varnishes are made. Some qualities