The Story of My Life

by "Billie Button"

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MY name is Billie Button, and my home is now at La Crosse, Wisconsin, but I expect to make a trip pretty soon and where I'll bring up Heaven only knows. On the waist of Sidney Christopher Sparks, at Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, maybe, or perhaps bedecking the dress that little Lucille Dunwoody, of Tulare, California, wears to her birthday party.

But while I am waiting for my call to start on the succession of journeys that will bring me to my final destination and career of usefulness, I've been asked by Mr. MacWillie, of the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company, to tell you the story of my life.

Now, I'm not a Kipling or an Ernest Seton-Thompson, but if you'll be patient and let me spin my yarn in my own way, I think you'll find it interesting, for I don't believe you have ever seen anything just like it in print before.

Now for a fresh start. My name, as I told you, is Billie Button—of the Pearl-Button family, if you please, distantly connected with the Ivory-Buttons, the Bone-Buttons, and the Brass-Buttons, but with quite a different history, I assure you.

In telling you about us Pearl-Buttons I am going to go clear back to the beginning of things, in the days of Old Mother Clam, on the mud flats of the Mississippi. I'll have something to say about how the festive clam lives—and dies—how its shell gets into the button factory and what happens to it there. There will be interesting chapters on my experience in the big, modern plant of the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company, at La Crosse.

And while my adventures may not bring you all the chills and thrills that follow Deadwood Dick or Sherlock Holmes, I believe that you will find them sufficiently varied and interesting to keep you from napping and to make you look forward to each successive chapter with a real hankering.

See here, though, THIS isn't my STORY—it's only the ADVANCE NOTICE of it, written (in true fifteen cent magazine fashion) by the author. The real story will start with next month's calendar.

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CHAPTER I. The author tells of his ancestry and pedigree, with side-lights on the habits of the care-free clam.

IN telling my story, I, Billie Button, must go back to the time long before I was I at all. Come with me, kind reader, to the Mississippi River, somewhere between Iowa and Wisconsin. Take a peep beneath its waters a little way off shore. Clams—Clams—Clams—millions of them, waiting in a "bed" a mile or more long, with their faces turned upstream and their mouths open, for the clam "toils not, neither does he spin," but waits for the big river to bring his food right down into his jaws. Not the clams that make your mouth water at the famous Clam Bakes of Long Island Sound, but their cousins, the Fresh-Water-Clams.

High-sounding names they have in the mouths of the scientific gentlemen who write Fisheries Bulletins and Zoologies. Take a long breath before you tackle them: Lampsilis Adontonoides, Anodonta Corpulenta, Plagiola Donaciformis, Quadrula Pustulata, and a lot of others that sound like the combatants in a Sicilian vendetta. Your clammer and longshore urchin, though, don't bother with scientific terminology, but dub them Slop Bucket, Nigger Head, Mucket, Pig Toe and other expressive if inelegant nicknames.

Ask that clammer over there to show you what his "crow foot" has brought up. Look carefully at the dozen or so specimens he dumps into your boat. Maybe they'll be all of one family, or just as likely every one will be different in appearance and name.

Pick up one and rip off its shell ruthlessly. (What's a clam's feelings to the pursuit of knowledge?) If it's breeding time and you have chanced on a mother clam, you will find the gills doing double duty, for besides performing their natural breathing functions they will be distended (wholly or in part) with a jelly-like mass containing thousands of tiny eggs, becoming what the scientists call the "marsupium" or brood pouch. If your specimen answers to the name of Paper Shell or Lampsilis Laevissima, these eggs will be pale or colorless. If it chances to be a Quadrula Ebena, they will be pink or bright red.

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CHAPTER II. Here you meet the Glochidium. Don't be afraid of his name. He is harmless

MAYBE the next clam you investigate will have no eggs at all—then you can gamble that it is a father clam, useful, but with a history that, as Kipling says, "is another story."

Number three opens up differently. The brood pouch is full, but not of eggs. Instead you'll see, if you look closely, myriads of little embryo clams or glochidia (how these professors do love to parade their Latin). These glochidia are hatched from the eggs in the brood pouch, but remain there, packed snug and tight, for periods of from a few weeks to several months, according to the particular kind of clam from which they spring. The glochidium is tiny, of course, and its shell is soft, but it has all the essential features of the adult clam, and in the brood pouch of the old mother clam its organs develop and it grows up toward perfect clamhood.

Now drop the rest of your clams into the bottom of your boat, row off down stream and try your luck as an angler. If fate is kind and bait attractive, you'll land a brace of rock bass or a sheepshead—at worst you can count on pulling in a few sunfish.

A GLOCHIDIUM

What has that to do with clams? Let's see.

Take a close look at that fish you caught last. Along its fins and gills you will find little rough humps and bunches—all closed over with "skin." Don't be suspicious. Mr. Fish isn't diseased—these are not boils or bunions, but another step in the life history of the clam, and a shining example of Dame Nature's way of caring for her helpless children.

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When you open these bunches you will find that each contains a glochidium just like one of those you saw in the clam's brood pouch a half hour back, only a little better developed. You have stumbled on the clam in its "parasitic" stage.

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CHAPTER III. *The clam's halcyon days—with a forewarning of trouble.*

THE glochidium, when thrust out by the mother clam into the cold and cruel world, closes its embryo shell on the fins or gills of the first fish that comes along, a sac or cyst forms about it, and it lives in this state for a few weeks, during which time it develops into a full fledged mussel. This doesn't hurt the fish at all, and is mighty beneficial to His Clamlets. The time spent as a parasite differs from two to six weeks, depending upon the particular kind of clam that is making its way in the world.

Bye and bye the glochidium gets tired of being dependent upon other folk, opens up the door of its house on the fish's fin and drops off to the bottom of the stream, where it takes its place in the clam bed as a fully developed, (although not fully grown), clam, breathing and sleeping, and keeping its mouth placidly open for the generous food supply the old Mississippi brings along. If the water is pure and runs rapidly, all's well and the clam thrives, but if a sewage system or factory pours its polluting waste into the stream, its existence is likely to be cut prematurely short.

"Very well," you say, "but is this the life story of a Clam or of a Pearl-Button?" Be patient, I'm coming to that, but first I must tell you how the clam's lot nowadays isn't such a soft snap after all, how it's worried and flurried, hunted and harried, and finally dragged forth from its bed to a slaughter of the innocents.

Here's how: For many years the clam from whose shell I sprang lay in a Mississippi clam-bed, with millions of its relatives. There it staid, eating its fill and growing in Summer, in Winter lying dormant; each year of its life marked by lines and grooves on its shell. For the first few years it grew rapidly, then slower and slower until—

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ONE DAY SOMETHING HAPPENED.

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CHAPTER IV. A good thing that turned out badly. The Clam's Calamity. Prizes of Pearls.

A LONG smack into its open mouth came something black that looked like a luscious bite, so it closed down its shell. But somehow this bite didn't prove as toothsome as it seemed, and pretty quick, "Whish, Whoosh" up it came, carrying the clam with it alongside a boat, and before slow-thinking Mr. Clam could let go, he was picked off and thrown down in the bottom of the boat, along with hundreds of others of his unsuspecting family. The seemingly tempting morsel was the hook of a "crow foot."

"What IS a 'crow foot?'" Well, it's what clam fishermen use in their business. To make it they take an iron bar ten or fifteen feet long and fasten to it twenty strings with stout three pronged hooks at the end of every string. The bar floats along in the water and when the clammer thinks he has a good catch he simply draws it in, pulls up the lines and takes off the clams which have fastened themselves to the hooks. When this particular clam was caught, most of the prongs on most of the hooks on most of the lines had a nice, fat clam hanging on for dear life.

Farewell to the contented idleness of the family Clam Bed—farewell to the generous feeding of the mighty river. My ancestor now becomes a martyr—not to SCIENCE but to COMMERCE.

When the clammers who caught him went ashore they dumped their load into a big vat of water, and built a hot enough fire under it to kill their catch; remorselessly, relentlessly and chuckling with unholy glee. In death the clam's jaws relaxed and he opened up. Then with his fellows he was thrown upon a sieve and his meat searched for pearls, and (tradition says) yielded one of the big pearl finds of the season.

For pearls, as you may know, are the object of the clammer's warfare on the clam. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of them are every year taken from the clams of the Mississippi, and several times single pearls valued at more than a thousand dollars have been found. The clammer, however, believes in utilizing the by-products, and after throwing away the clam meat or selling it to neighboring farmers to feed their hogs, starts the shells on their way to the button factory.

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CHAPTER V. A very important chapter, for it chronicles the author's birth.

A FEW days before this clam I've been telling about was dragged to its doom, a buyer for the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company, of La Crosse, Wisconsin, happened along and gathered up samples of shells from this particular "bed." At the factory these samples went through searching tests for color, lustre and breakage, proving up so well that the buyer contracted for the season's shell output from the bed.

The Upper Mississippi Clam, by the way, yields a superior grade of shell, for the changes of the Northern Climate make it rugged and vigorous. Its character reflects the stern and upbuilding experiences of northern climes. Let other buttons trace their source to the Arkansas or the Wabash. I am proud that I got my start "Up North."

In the carload, with my progenitor, were hundreds of different kinds and grades of shells. But no two of these can be cut precisely alike, so, as soon as the factory is reached, in steps an army of sorters, keen-eyed judges of family likenesses, and presently every kind and size of shell in the car has found its way to a bin filled with its "nearest-like" relatives.

AND HERE'S WHERE MY OWN LIFE STORY REALLY BEGINS.

"Once upon a very fine day," as the story book says, the head "cutter" called for the particular grade of shells to which my ancestral clam shell belonged. For a week it had been preparing with his fellows for the ordeal in which ITS identity was to be lost and MINE begun—soaking in a vat of water to make it tougher and less brittle. But finally up to the cutting room it went. Here a man specially trained in cutting this one kind of shell seized it, put it on a lathe beneath a little cylindrical saw, applied the power, and—b-z-z-z!, the miracle had been wrought—I was born.

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Not yet, however, was I a full fledged button—only a BLANK—one of hundreds of the same size, with dozens of other sizes and grades dropping out of machines all around.

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CHAPTER VI. My education begins and I become a Real Button.

I SOON found out that however much HUMAN babies are coddled, baby BUTTONS have a perilous time of it. My development to maturity was as strenuous as it was swift. With other blanks from the same cutter I first passed through the sorting machine, where five different thicknesses of blanks are automatically separated from one another. Away next to the grinding machine—severe kindergarten for infant buttons—where the rough clam shell "bark" is taken off by revolving emery wheels. On then, "rig-a-jig-jig-and-away-we-go" to a sort of big churn affair partly filled with water, in which we blanks bump up against one another and the water until our rough edges are worn down smooth. It's good for us, but it's a worse drubbing than you get in a Turkish bath. After THIS experience our stay in the drying machine, where all moisture is taken out of our systems, seems like the Seventh Heaven.

Now comes a most important step in my life. I am about to be advanced from my novitiate as a "blank" into full orders as a real, bona-fide, honest-to-goodness button. This initiation takes place in the "Automatic" Room, where a wonderful machine gives us blanks three degrees in quick succession. First our edges are rounded off by sharp steel chisels beneath which we pass. Then zip-biff, a depression is cut in our middles, and zzt-zzt, sharp steel bits cut in our button-holes—four of them for me, as you've seen by my picture, two for some of my cousins. At last I am a really unmistakable Pearl-Button.

There are forty machines for advancing us from blanks into buttons in this room at the factory, and from twenty-five hundred to three thousand of us take the degree every minute of the working day.

But my education isn't over. Iv'e got to acquire a lot of things yet before I can go out and fill my destined place in the world.

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CHAPTER VII. Here's where I show the stuff that's in me, and get due Credit.

SO away I am sent to the polishing room, where I get the REAL ACID TEST. Into a large revolving barrel I go, plump into a solution of sulphuric acid, weak at first but gradually increased in strength. Here's where I get toughened to meet the hard knocks of later life. My, how it "bites," but I have the satisfaction of knowing that the ordeal will prepare me for service, and for beauty as well, for pearl buttons, like steel, have to be hardened and tempered before they can take on a high gloss. An hour and a half of this, then two minutes in another biting bath of hydrochloric acid, which puts on the gloss. Further details of my toilet follow thick and fast—if any of the acid were left on me, my good looks wouldn't last, so I am drenched with steam and water and shaken up vigorously in boxes containing saw-dust, which removes every trace of acid and leaves me beautifully lustrous.

Next we Pearl-Buttons go to the Sorting Room. Here comes the final crucial test. If we have native weaknesses, they stand revealed. If we have failed to benefit to the full by our factory experiences, our shortcomings are detected. Sharp-eyed girls with deft fingers rapidly sort us into piles—First Grade, Second Grade, Third Grade and Fourth Grade. Some of us, I am sorry to say, meet the test so poorly that we are thrown into the "defective" pile as totally unfit for life's stern duties.

This story of my career is in its essential features like that of every pearl button that goes through the big Wisconsin Pearl Button Company factory at La Crosse. There are, of course, differences in grades and sizes, and some of us have to be bleached in the making, while others simply won't bleach, and become, by special processes, converted into Smoked-Buttons. In a general way, though, my experience is typical.

I was lucky enough to be classed as First Grade, and with many of my fortunate companions was sent into a La Crosse cottage, where Hilda Swenson sewed me on an attractive paper card, along with eleven others of my class. And here I am in the stock room, back at the factory, waiting my call to go out into the big busy world. I wonder if it will be New York or Seattle for mine—or Detroit or Natchez.

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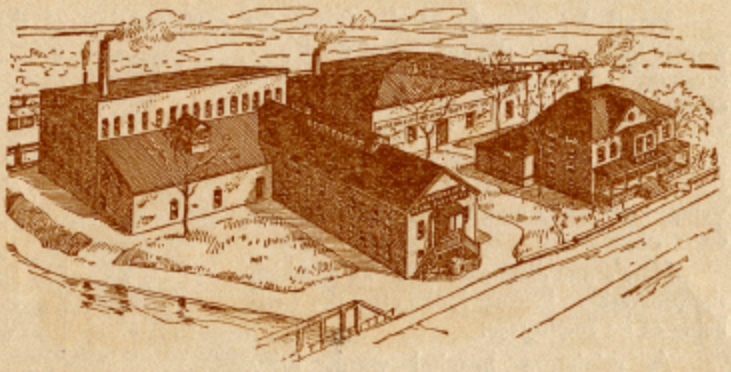
CHAPTER VIII. About my Birthplace—and how they do things in a big Button Factory

I SHOULD be ungrateful indeed if I told you only about MYSELF and MY ANCESTRY, and didn't devote at least one chapter of my life story to my BIRTHPLACE and HOME, the factory of the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

This factory is a big, modern, industrial plant conducted on broad-gauge lines of scientific management. Its slogan is "Efficiency." Every one of its three hundred and fifty employees is imbued with the spirit of ACCOMPLISHMENT and QUALITY. These employees are picked workers, and each of them receives special training in his or her particular task before being intrusted with a part in the production of the finished button. This assures in us who come from this factory a high standard of quality that has made the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company's output eagerly sought by buyers who know and demand the best in pearl buttons.



In this factory SYSTEM and STANDARDIZATION are the big ideas.

SYSTEM cuts out waste in handling and manufacture, reduces the labor required for each operation to the minimum, and at the same time makes every stroke of work count big for quality. STANDARDIZATION insures the perfect, even finishing and grading of the entire product.

All the clam shells that come into the factory are, as I've told you, graded for species. This enables each cutter to become an expert in his line, for, by cutting only one kind of shell, he acquires the ability to turn out the greatest possible number of good blanks, and to produce the highest possible quality of blanks at the lowest possible price. All operations in the factory are standardized and the employees are trained to the high quality standard upon which the notable prestige of the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company has been built up.

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To obtain quantity of production and quality in the finished product, the factory is equipped with automatic machinery of the most improved type. In the making room each of the twenty-five button machines has a speed of 45 to 80 buttons per minute. In the cutting room are batteries of lathes, on each of which several different sizes of buttons can be made by simply changing the saw, spool or chuck.

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CHAPTER IX. How the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company provides for the Well-being of its Employees

A COMPLETE record is made of every button produced in the factory, and the percentages of each of the different grades are carefully checked. Double Inspection in the Grading Room secures marvelous uniformity in each of the different grades ("firsts," "seconds," "thirds" and "fourths") marketed.

In spite of its traffic with the murderous Clammers, the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company is a human and HUMANE institution. It believes in looking after the welfare of its employees; sees that they work under the best sanitary and moral conditions, and have the opportunity to participate fairly in the results of their labor.

In all departments of the factorythe compensation of the worker varies with the amount of work performed. The minimum wage scale paid is ample for decent and comfortable living, while increased production gets substantial recognition in the weekly pay envelope. Its liberal treatment of its workers has developed efficiency and quality in the highest degree.

Here's one example of the way in which the progressive factory looks after the well-being of its employees:

A miniature hospital ward, fully equipped with all the necessary appliances, has been fitted up at the factory and placed in charge of a trained nurse. Employees who are taken ill or meet with accidents are cared for in this ward at the Company's expense. This nurse also examines all girls who apply for employment at the factory, to find out whether or not they are in physical condition for the work.

This Pearl-Button family of ours is a big family, I tell you. The Wisconsin Pearl Button Company sends out ten different sizes of us, twelve different patterns in both two-hole and four-hole buttons, and eight different grades. Take your pencil and figure this out and you'll see that right here there are over 1900 different branches of our family tree.

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CHAPTER X. A Business that grows fast—and an Industry that amounts to something

"WHAT becomes of the waste shell?" Oh, that is crushed, bagged up and shipped away to be used in making such useful products as chicken feed and fertilizers.

Every week twenty-five to thirty thousand gross of us Pearl-Buttons have the finishing touches put on our education. From the factory we go all over the country, from Maine to California, to Wholesale Dry Goods and Notion Houses, and to manufacturers of Shirts, Night Robes, Dresses, Wrappers, Waists, Aprons, Sweaters and other garments.

The remarkable growth of the business of the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company during the past seven years shows that "quality counts" in buttons as in everything else. For the year ending July 1st, 1907, the output of the factory was 237,400 gross, while the year ending July 1st, 1913, saw this swelled to the neat, round total of 1,580,220 gross, while for the present business year a production of 1,800,000 gross is planned. What a string of pearl buttons that would make. "Consistent delivery with right prices," says Mr. MacWillie, "accounts for this splendid increase."

We Pearl-Buttons, of the Fresh-Water branch of the family, have worked a revolution in the button business. New as our family is (the Fresh-Water Pearl-Button was practically unknown twenty-five years ago), it has made itself a power in the world's industrial life. In the past twenty years we have saved the users of pearl buttons over two hundred millions of dollars, for our aristocratic relatives, the Ocean Pearl-Buttons, cost from twenty-five cents a dozen up and weren't a bit better for practical use in life than we are. No longer must people pay high prices or content themselves with poor, easily breakable makeshifts of agate or bone. Fresh-Water Pearl-Buttons can now be used on even the least expensive garments. Thirty-seven billion, five hundred million of us went forth from the button factories of America last year. What do you think of that?

Our commercial importance is recognized by the big National Association of Pearl Button Manufacturers, including in its membership over twenty factories in seventeen different states. This organization exercises a watchful, if selfish, care over our clam-progenitors, for there's danger that our family history would be cut short if existing clam-beds were relentlessly ravaged without anything being done to renew the supply. So the Association has interested the United States Fisheries Bureau in the protection and artificial propagation of fresh-water mussels, and a great deal of practical work is being done by fisheries experts and scientists to keep up the supply.

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CHAPTER XI. Being the Epilogue, this is short and ends happily.

HERE, patient reader, is my Epilogue, the thing the classy author always tacks on to his story to dispose of his characters after the Wedding Bells and Rice.

When I laid down my pen I was at the factory, neatly carded, expectantly waiting for something to turn up. IT HAS TURNED UP. I'm at work in the world at last—and how I traveled to get there. First to the big home of a jobbing house in Cincinnati, then (happily for my literary ambitions) out to a store in a little Indiana town. On then with the eleven fellow journeyers on my "card" to a pleasant home—off in an hour to the dressmaker, where snip, off the card I went, and skilful fingers sewed me fast to a little girl's frock. There's where I am now, right in the heart and center of James-Whitcomb-Rileydom, and Isabel's mamma says I'm a mighty good Pearl-Button to stand the wear and tear of schooldays and washdays the way I do.

But with becoming modesty I disclaim the credit for the quality she praises, for this rightfully belongs to the way I was brought up and trained—back there in the Wisconsin Pearl Button Company's factory at La Crosse.

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DESCRIPTIVE STORY OF A
PURELY AMERICAN INDUSTRY

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MACHINERY *and* EVERYTHING
CONNECTED *with the* PRO-
DUCTION *and* DISTRIBUTION
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