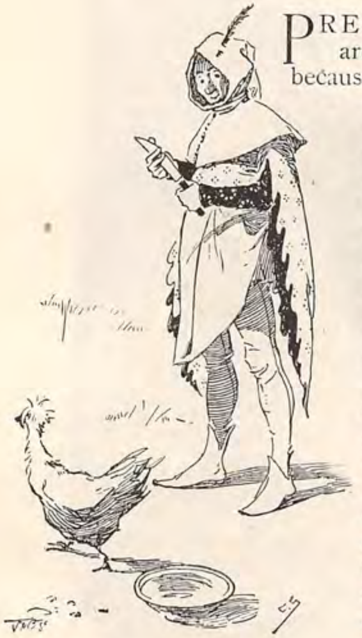
The MYSTERY of PRECIOUS STONES



"WHEN THE STONE IS BECOME PERFECT IN THE CAPON, HE DON'T DRINK."

PRECIOUS stones are valuable only because we think them valuable. If the world at large considered that they were worth nothing, they would become worth nothing—as in Sir Thomas More's "Utopia," diamonds would be playthings for children. We should not, in consequence, be less warmly clad or less well fed, or more subject to disease; we should not, in consequence, suffer any material disadvantage. The world would go on as well as before—the political economist might tell us that it would go on better.

Yet this love of precious stones, which gives them their value, is older than writing, and is to-day more widely spread than a knowledge of long division. It forms a delightfully dark spot in this painfully bright and utilitarian age. The diamonds in my lady's hair and the soot on the chimney-sweep's face are precisely the same thing in different forms. Both have a value, but for different reasons. Soot has a value because, as gardeners know, it can be used. Diamonds also may be used —for glass-cutting, watch-making, and the engraving of glyptics—but it is not this use which gives them their high value; nor is it solely that their appearance makes them ornamental—for this appearance can be imitated in a way which would deceive any but the expert. It is the combination of beauty and rarity in a hard permanent form, and the prestige which diamonds, in common with other precious stones, derive from their history and associations. It is their appeal to taste and sentiment.

Precious stones have been associated—at almost all times and in almost all countries—with the powers, civil and religious. Kings and priests alike have loved to possess them; they have served to illuminate the dignity of church and state. The extravagance of some of the Roman emperors in this respect was hardly greater than the extravagance of some of our own kings and queens or of four successive Louis of France. Cleopatra dissolved and drank a pearl. It is said that in the reign of Louis XV. a Prince de Condé, to whom a lady had returned the brilliant that he had given her, dried the ink of his letter to her on the subject with the dust of the powdered diamond. The jewelled chalices, censers, reliquaries, and vestments of the church have not been more magnificent than the jewelled shrines of heathen idols. Everywhere the association of gems and power has been notable. With engraved gems we find the same thing. The signet-ring is the symbol of authority, and it is to the engraved signet that the origin of the august science of heraldry may be traced. To the antiquity, splendour, and dignity of their history and associations may be added the charms of romance and mystery. They take their part in the stories of love and crime, and during the Middle Ages the strangest beliefs prevailed concerning their mysterious powers and virtues.

The mass of superstitions on this subject probably died out among educated people about the end of the seventeenth century. Half-way through the eighteenth century we find the learned congratulating themselves vastly on their recent enlightenment. In 1750 a translation of the famous old work of Camillus Leonardus on the qualities and virtues of precious stones, " now first Translated into English," was " printed for *J. Freeman* in *Fleet Street.*" The original work appeared about two hundred and fifty years before, and the translator is careful to point out that what did very well for Camillus Leonardus in 1502 will by no means do for Mr. Translator in 1750. He writes in his preface : " But tho' what I have said, in regard to the Use and Excellence of this little treatise, is incontestibly the Truth ; yet I must give the Reader a Caution in the Perusal of it." The reader is not to be influenced by the superstitious belief of the unenlightened Leonardus, a belief " which, in our Days, is entirely out of Use, at least is laid aside by the Learned."

I confess that this translating gentleman annoys me. His own grandfather was probably not very much less credulous on the subject than Leonardus. He is a bumptious prig. He mutilates that author's work, and excuses himself with a pious plea that savours of rank hypocrisy. There were three books in the work of Leonardus, and the translator omits the third. Why? Because it deals with the magical properties of engraved gems. " But as nothing of this kind suits the Taste of the more enlighten'd Moderns, we judged it wholly impertinent to trouble our Readers with Speculations not agreeable to right Reason, nor indeed consistent with our Religion." If it was improper to translate the third book, it was just as improper to translate the first and second, which are every bit as full of erroneous and superstitious beliefs. But his next sentence explains the delicacy of his conscience. " However, if the Curious, for their amusement, are desirous of knowing the Sentiments of the Antients in these Matters, upon the Intimation of their Desire, we will give them a Translation of this our Author's Third Book, in a small Volume by itself." Quite so ; the translator's conscience was in the publisher's pocket. " J. Freeman in Fleet Street " was a cautious man, and had said that he would try the two books first and see how they did before he risked anything on the third.

The author is better than the translator, and the darkness of 1500 is infinitely more interesting and amusing than the enlightenment of 1750. True the book is mostly compiled from the work of others, but there is a distinct character about it. Nothing could be more naïve, more child-like, and more delightfully sly. The list of precious stones includes many that are not to be bought in Bond Street to-day, many that are not precious stones, and some that (it is to be feared) never existed outside the author's charming imagination.

Take, for instance, the *alectoria*. It has a long list of virtues. Firstly, it makes a man invisible. Secondly, "being held in the Mouth, it allays Thirst, and therefore is proper for Wrestlers." It is said (though it is not mentioned in this translation) that Milo, the famous wrestler, wore this stone, and the modern athlete in training would probably be thankful for it. It is a stone of all work, this *alectoria*. It makes a woman agreeable to her husband, and will fill in its time by helping to regain a lost kingdom and acquire a foreign one. This being so (and Leonardus says without hesitation that it is so), one naturally wants to know where to find it. It is to be found in one place only—in the intestines of a capon which has lived seven years. " When the Stone is become perfect in the Capon, he don't drink. However, 'tis never bigger than a large Bean."

"IT IS THE CROW'S FAULT" (*p.* 862).

Then there is the *corvia* or *corvina*, on the subject of which Leonardus is distinctly pleasant. This is the way we are to secure a specimen of *corvia* if we want it. "On the Calends of *April*"—and it will be seen subsequently that the date is not inappropriate—"boil the Eggs taken out of a Crow's Nest till they are hard, and being cold, let them be placed in the Nest as they were before. When the Crow knows this, she flies a long Way to find this Stone; and having found it returns to the Nest; and the Eggs being touch'd with it they become fresh and prolifick." Observe the cunning of Leonardus. If you do not get your *corvia* it is the crow's fault for not having been able to find a specimen. It does not prove that Leonardus is wrong, and you may try again on the next first of April. It brings you only riches, honour, and the gift of prophecy, but still it seems to be a sort of stone quite worth having.

The virtues of coral are many. It keeps off ghosts, bad dreams, storms, and "every Incursion of wild Beasts." It cures a long list of diseases. "I have had it from a creditable Person," writes Leonardus, "and have often experienced it myself, that it will prevent Infants, just born, from falling into an Epilepsy. Let there be put in the Mouth of the Child, before it has tasted any Thing, half a scruple of the Powder of Red Coral, and let it be swallowed; for it is a wonderful Preserver." The child takes coral; the child does not have epilepsy; therefore coral prevents epilepsy in children. And yet, I believe, coral is not to be found in the modern pharmacopœia.

Another curious stone of which Leonardus speaks—coral is not a precious stone, by the way—is the bezoar. Leonardus does not mention where it was procured, but describes it as a "red, dusty, light and brittle stone." He says that it is a sovereign remedy against all poisons. Burton, in his "Anatomy of Melancholy," says that the bezoar "is found in the belly of a little beast in the East Indies, brought into Europe by Hollanders and our country-men merchants. Renodeus saith he saw two of these beasts alive in the castle of the lord of Vitry at Coubert." He recommends it warmly as a remedy for melancholy. Queen Elizabeth had a bezoar stone; the Emperor Charles V. had four of them. Of course, curious concretions are found from time to time in the stomach and intestines of animals, and the ancients at once credited them with miraculous powers. Hence the stories of the alectoria and the bezoar. Élie Reclus, writing of the Badagas, a tribe of the Neilgherries, or Blue Mountains, says that their babies are dosed "with a scruple of a certain magma reputed sacred, and found now and again in the entrails of a bull. This secretion is somewhat like those bezoar stones, to which our Middle Ages attributed marvellous virtues."

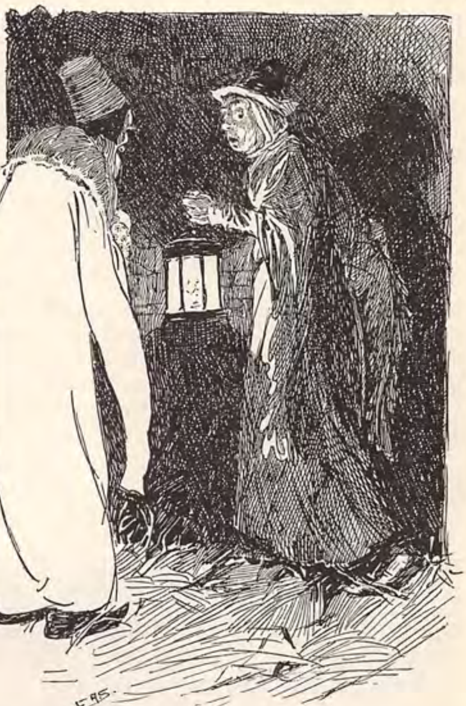
The translator of Leonardus may have been right in his assertion that the beliefs of Leonardus were not the beliefs of the learned of 1750. But superstition still lingered around precious stones, if not among the learned, certainly among many who would have been reluctant to be called ignorant. An interesting instance of this occurred eleven years afterwards at the coronation of George III. The coronation, by the way, was not well stage-managed, and the King complained of the arrangements to the Deputy Earl Marshal, the Earl of Effingham. His reply was one of the things that should have been said differently: "It is true, sir, that there has been some neglect, but I have taken care that the *next coronation* shall be regulated in the exactest manner possible." However, the Earl of Effingham was not responsible for the incident at the coronation which occasioned so much talk at the time—the finest of the Royal jewels fell from the crown. The superstitious all declared that some great loss would befall England. As it happened, they were right. "When in 1782," writes Jesse, "the British Crown was dispossessed of its proudest appanage, the North American colonies, there were many persons who eagerly called to mind the warning portent of 1761." The fallen jewel was recovered, but no alectoria regained the lost kingdom.

The belief in the malignant powers of the Koh-i-noor is not held in this country as it was in its native land, but even at the present day we are not quite without our superstitions. The Romans tied little bunches of coral round the necks of children; in the Middle Ages, as we have seen, coral was considered to be beneficial for children; to this day coral necklaces and ornaments are given to children. Educated people give them from custom and not from superstition, but if an inquiry were held into the beliefs of nineteenth-century nursemaids (a stupendous undertaking, on which I do not propose to embark), I think it would be found that some at any rate held that the coral was in some mysterious way "good for the child." There is, however, one superstition which is still firmly held by some educated people—the superstition that the opal is unlucky, and about this there is something to be said.

When Pliny, or Albertus Magnus, or Leonardus tells me some wild and erroneous story about a precious stone, I am not convinced of the truth of the story, but I can enjoy it, and I have a feeling of kindliness for the author. It comes from a time long past, with the charm of age upon it, and it is not to be treated harshly. But I cannot enjoy this modern, vulgar superstition about opals. It is hideously modern. No one before the present century considered the opal unlucky. On the contrary, no stone was esteemed more highly by the ancients. Whether, as is said, *opalus* is another form of *ophthalmius* ("eye-stone"), I will not pretend to settle. It looks probable, and the one canon in philology that I have ever been able to grasp is that anything which looks probable is wrong. But certainly the opal was supposed to be particularly good for the eyesight, strengthening and preserving it. "It cannot be improper to attribute to it so many Virtues," writes Leonardus, "since it partakes of the Nature and Colour of so many Stones." How then did this ridiculous *parvenu* of a prejudice against opals first come into being? Most modern authorities assure us that this superstition arose out of a novel, "Anne of Geierstein."

"Anne of Geierstein" was an historical novel. That is to say, Sir Walter Scott was writing about a country in which he had never been, and a period in which he had not lived. He collected his information, and then did his best with it. The incident of the opal seems to show that he had some vague information about the stone, and that he had improved upon it, as it were. The story is, briefly, more or less as follows :—The Baron of Arnheim was told one evening that the devil was in his stable ; he went out to look and found that what had been, on a cursory examination, mistaken for the devil was in reality a Persian magus. This magus demanded refuge and hospitality for a year and a day, and the Baron granted it. They were both brethren of the Sacred Fire, and the law of Zoroaster requires that the stronger should protect the weaker. But, as the Baron somewhat commercially pointed out, the law of Zoroaster also required that the wiser should instruct the more ignorant. In return for board, lodging, and protection the magus gave instruction in "the more secret mysteries." I do not know what these are—probably Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" in Bohn's translation. At the end of the year and a day the Baron expressed his regret at losing a tutor who had given him every satisfaction. The magus replied that he would send his daughter to carry on the work. But he warned the Baron not to marry her, "for such alliances never come to a happy issue, of which my own is an example." After this shocking divorce of the antecedent and the relative, he exclaimed, "But, hush, we are observed!" a remark not uncommon in historical novels.

In due time the daughter arrived, mysteriously ; she instructed the Baron ; the Baron married her. Apart from the extraordinary attractiveness of all governesses in fiction, there is the canon that a man must always marry anyone whom he is particularly told not to marry. She was very beautiful, and she wore a suberb opal set in a gold clasp in her hair. The appearance of the stone seemed to sympathise with her moods, becoming more brilliant when she was particularly gay. It was noticed that she was careful that no liquid should go near this stone, and for this reason she never made the sign of the cross on her forehead when she took the holy water. Thereupon the scandalmongers said that she was a demon. At the christening or their child the baron determined to refute this calumny. "As they passed the threshold, the Baron dipt his finger in the font-stone, and offered holy water to his lady, who accepted it, as usual, by touching his finger with her own." Then, "with an air of sportive familiarity, which was rather unwarranted by the time and place"—and certainly it *is* a little like Harry at Hampstead on a bank holiday—"he flirted on her beautiful forehead a drop or two of the moisture which remained on his own hand. The opal, on which one of these drops had lighted,



THE PERSIAN MAGUS MISTAKEN FOR THE DEVIL.

shot out a brilliant spark like a falling star, and became the instant afterwards lightless and colourless as a common pebble." The mystical, beautiful Persian governess did the only thing which was left her to do—she vanished mysteriously. The disaster might have been avoided if the governess had worn her opal at the back of her head instead of the front; and as she was so anxious to avoid the disaster, it strikes one that she might have thought of an expedient so obvious and so simple. But if she had, there would have been no story.

The influence of the Waverley Novels was very great. They made fashions. But I do not believe that one incident in one novel—and that novel quite surprisingly inferior to the best of the Waverley series—could deprive the most beautiful of all precious stones of its vogue and seriously lower its value. But I do believe that this could have been effected by the fact on which Sir Walter Scott founded his novel. Let us see what that fact was.

Opals come to us principally from Hungary, Queensland, and Mexico. I have seen stones of about equal beauty from all three places, but, speaking roughly, the Hungarian are the best. All opals are sensitive; they seem to vary in brilliance according to the temperature, and the dryness or humidity of the atmosphere. I have been told by those who wear them constantly that they vary in brilliance according to the health of the person wearing them. Before they are properly matured, cut, and set, they carry sensitiveness to the point of treachery. Anyone but an expert is likely to go wrong in buying recently mined opals, or in deciding their value before they have stood the test of the lapidary's wheel. Indeed, even the experts sometimes find to their cost that they have made mistakes. Mexican opals have the name for being especially perfidious. It is said that, owing to injury by water or sudden changes of temperature, they may lose their colour, and become dead or opaque. There is the fact on which Sir Walter Scott based his story, and it is probably the fact which gave rise to the superstition among those who were not acquainted with the chemical analysis of the opal and the reason for the variability—sometimes the actual death—of the stone. Huysman's morbid and impossible hero rejected opals for this reason: "*Celui-ci avait d'abord songé à quelques opales et à quelques hydrophanes; mais ces pierres intéressantes par l'hésitation de leurs couleurs, par le doute de leurs flammes, sont par trop insoumises et infidèles; l'opale a une sensibilité toute rhumatismale; le jeu de ses rayons s'altère, suivant l'humidité, la chaleur, ou le froid; quant à l'hydrophane elle ne brûle que dans l'eau et ne consent à allumer sa braise grise qu'alors qu'en la mouille.*"

"THEN ALL THE SPIRITS THAT DWELL IN DARKNESS SHALL OBEY THE WEARER."

More people are likely to think that the variability of the opal adds to its interest. It is the woman among precious stones—beautiful, but just a little capricious. Not only is it by far the loveliest of all stones (ranking as a precious stone in spite of its want of hardness), but it is also said to be the only precious stone which absolutely cannot be imitated. A commercial objection to the opal, on the ground that it sometimes goes off completely, would be a fairly good reason for not buying opals, except from a jeweller who was an honest expert, or unless the buyer happened to be an expert himself. A superstitious objection to the opal is not old enough to have the charm of antiquity and just too old to have the charm of novelty. However, it is said that the stone is under royal patronage and rapidly regaining its vogue, and certainly it seems absurd that this age should retain only that superstition which the Middle Ages would have unhesitatingly rejected. It would be just as sensible to believe—and we should have more authority for believing—that the amethyst taken externally dispelled drunkenness, that pearls taken internally cured the quartan ague, or that the ruby by changing its colour warned the wearer of any impending misfortune.

Perhaps even more wild were the superstitions firmly believed in the Middle Ages about engraved gems. The Rev. C. W. King, the great authority on glyptics, in his "Handbook of Engraved Gems," quoted a list of these and their virtues. These virtues are not always very attractive. Take, for example, the following: "Bird, with olive-leaf in its bill, cut in pyrites and set in a silver ring. Having this on thy right hand thou shalt be invited to every feast, and those present shall not eat, but shall gaze upon thee."

It may be pleasant to be invited everywhere, but it cannot be pleasant to be in the position of the lion at the Zoo and have one's dinner regarded as a performance. More useful, from the commercial point of view, is a design of a man standing on a dragon and holding a sword, set in a leaden or iron ring. "Then all the spirits that dwell in darkness shall obey the wearer, and shall reveal unto him in a low-toned song the place of hidden treasure and the mode of winning the same." After this, the assurance that a stag cut on any stone cures lunatics and madmen seems positively commonplace. Hidden treasure has for some time been a favourite subject with the novelists, but I do not remember that they have yet used the dragon-ring and the communicative and contralto spirits.

One more instance of the mystery of stones remains to be mentioned—the property ascribed to the rock-crystal or the beryl of inducing clairvoyance. But this property is not exclusively their own; clairvoyance is (or is supposed to be) practised in a similar manner with a mirror, or a little ink in a saucer. St. Simon has a curious story in his memoirs of a little girl who gazed into a glass of water, and saw in it the scene of the king's death. St. Simon is careful to add that he records the story "*non pour l'approuver, mais pour le rendre.*" The mystical property of the beryl-stone forms the subject of Rossetti's strange ballad, "Rose Mary." In Mr. Podmore's book, "Apparitions and Thought-Transference," cases will be found of crystal-gazing well-authenticated and quite as wonderful as anything that Dr. Dee and the Specularii could produce. Of course there is no pretence of magic about the modern crystal-gazing. It is explained, or at any rate classified.

For the matter of that, everything is explained nowadays. There is no longer any mystery in precious stones, and there is very little anywhere else. Yet as one looks back from an age which believes almost nothing to these fables of the age which believed almost everything, one does so rather with a wistful regret than with the more comfortable feeling of complacent superiority. A man of age and experience may look back upon his childhood and see that his ignorance at that time led to mistakes, and the mistakes to unhappiness. He is wiser now and no longer makes mistakes; but, if he could, he would go back to his childhood, because then things were still possible.

BARRY PAIN.