

Things of Most Price in the British Museum.

BY RUDOLPH DE CORDOVA.



WHILE gathering the information for this article I met a couple of American acquaintances in one of the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum. They had what has been called the typical museum expression on their faces—a combination of enfeebled interest and intellectual dulness, in curious contrast to what I knew was their vital temperament.

“Rather a depressing sort of an entertainment this,” said one; “but you have to do it all the same when you come to Europe.”

Here I thought was an opportunity to try whether the article I was contemplating would interest other people. Without seeming to have any set purpose I led the way to the case in which the mummy of Menkaura, that King of the Fourth Egyptian Dynasty who built the third of the pyramids of Gizeh, and who lived B.C. 3633, reposes with a publicity which His Majesty never dreamed of in his most imaginative moments. “If that specimen could be put up to auction,” I said, “the best judges believe that it would fetch a sum not less than £75,000. If you look at the knee-joints you will find that they are very much enlarged and thickened, proving that his defunct Majesty suffered very badly from gout or chronic rheumatoid arthritis.”

The effect was almost electrical. In an instant my two comrades had lost their listlessness and were all attention. I now felt certain that I was on the right track.

In the next case is an object not less remarkable, though it is no crumbling dust of King, but merely the remains of some unknown, unrecorded son of earth who has become immortal by the divine right of time. Placed on his left side, with knees drawn up to his chin, his hands before his face, this body was found in a grave hollowed out of sandstone, which the irreverent have called a “pie dish.” A dead body in a grave does not seem at first sight a valuable possession, yet this is the only one in so complete a form in Europe, and indeed, so far as experts know, in the whole world. It was found on the western bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt, and is all that remains of a man of the Neolithic age.

How many centuries ago that dead body was inspired with the breath of life and lived and moved and had its being on this earth

he would be a bold man who would dogmatize. Certain it is he lived thousands of years before the dawn of Egyptian history, long before the rule of Menes, the first historical King.

What price shall be set on such an object? Fifteen thousand pounds would be dirt cheap, for were it possible to put it up to auction, with all the adventitious aids of modern advertisement, representatives would come from every museum in the world, to say nothing of private collectors from America, to whom money is as water to be poured out in the acquisition of really valuable “things.”

The result of ten minutes with my friends, “spotting” various items in the gallery from their pecuniary point of view, convinced me of the enormous advantage it would be if the Museum authorities could be got to consider the advisability of putting a price on the most notable articles in the National Collection. That course would appeal with undoubted force to every visitor, though antiquarians may gnash their teeth and scientific men write homilies against the barbarism of appraising unique articles like an auctioneer’s clerk.

Auctioneer’s clerk, however, I propose to be in regard to the treasure store of the Museum, and to suggest the enormous source of wealth which lies within the walls of the stately building in Great Russell Street. One word only by way of preamble—though in this article one can necessarily touch only the fringe of the subject, so to speak—one word of assurance and good faith that the greatest pains have been taken to obtain something like an approximate value which the articles would fetch could they come into the market under favourable conditions. To get them into the market is, however, impossible, for, as most people know, anything which gets into the National Collection remains there, and can never afterwards be sold.

But, the question of good faith apart, the serious consideration of this subject is imperative, for £ s. d. crystallizes sentiment, and long after this article and its writer have been forgotten the figures quoted are, I have been assured, certain to be remembered by experts, and used in appraising the value of other treasures which may come into the market.

Perhaps the most universally-known of the great art treasures are the Elgin Marbles, those wonderful evidences of the skill of the immortal Phidias, whose career was cut short by death while he lay in prison under gross suspicion charged with stealing the gold intended to adorn the great ivory statue of Athena, and who was rendered further unpopular by the fact that he had introduced portraits of himself and Pericles on the shield of the statue of Athena. Evidences of the enormous value of the marbles, as of the fact that "doctors differ," is certainly to be found, in that they have been variously estimated as being worth £1,000,000, £2,000,000, and £3,000,000 — in other words, they are priceless; although in 1816 the Government paid Lord Elgin only £35,000 for them. Yet to-day the single figure of Theseus would fetch at least some three times that sum could it be put up to auction.

Obtained from Greece by what foreign nations, doubtless inspired by jealousy at not possessing them, called "theft," the question was at one time raised by Mr. Frederic Harrison and other writers in the *Nineteenth Century* as to whether the marbles should not be restored to the country to whose genius they are an everlasting monument and an unexampled glory.

Another famous and popular object in the Museum is the Portland Vase, to see which Americans come in hundreds and indeed thousands every year, so well known is its fame across the Atlantic. About 10in. high, made of glass of a wonderful deep blue, ornamented in relief with a series of figures of opaque white glass, it was found in a marble sarcophagus under the Monte del Grano, some two and a half miles from Rome on the way to Frascati.

For a long time it was the chief ornament of the great Barberini Palace at Rome, but towards the end of the eighteenth century it was bought by Sir William Hamilton, who in

his turn sold it to the Duchess of Portland in 1785, and by the then Duke of Portland it was deposited in the British Museum in 1810. The Museum did not then occupy its present building, and in 1845, while it was still in Montague House, the vase was broken by an act of vandalism.

A man named William Lloyd, who was employed in the Museum, got drunk one day in the February of that year, and, picking up a Babylonian stone which lay on the ground, he shied it at the vase, which was placed under a glass case. There was a crash, and the case and the vase fell shattered to the ground. The Museum authorities approached the Duke of Portland with a view to

prosecuting the man, but, for reasons of his own, the Duke refused to appear, and the only thing the Museum could do was to bring the culprit before a magistrate on a charge of wantonly breaking the glass case! The magistrate fined him a couple of pounds, and the fine was considerably paid by an old lady with more sympathy than sense, so that the man got off scot-free. The pieces were put together again, and perhaps the romance which has thus clustered around the vase may have enhanced its value.

Certain it is that, could the United States get the opportunity, it would think nothing of paying anywhere from

£10,000 to £12,000 to possess it to-morrow.

In the same department of Greek and Roman antiquities are some of the objects which illustrate this article, the beautiful winged head of Hypnos (Sleep), the Siris bronzes, and the great cameos of Augustus. The Hypnos, which is one of the finest pieces of bronze in the world, has been said by a critic to "reveal the qualities of Praxiteles" perhaps better than any other ancient work. As will be seen, the Hypnos is merely the head which once belonged to a statue. It was ornamented with wings rising from the temples. Now, however, only the



THE PORTLAND VASE—ESTIMATED VALUE £10,000 TO £12,000.



HYPNOS—ESTIMATED VALUE £5,000.

wing on the right side remains, though the base by which the left wing was soldered on may be distinctly seen. It is worth recording that the head was made separate from the statue, and was soldered on to the trunk, while the wing has been clearly recognised as that of the night hawk, and is therefore peculiarly applicable to a statue of Sleep. This head has been valued at £5,000, about £1,000 more than the bronzes of Siris, which derive their name from the fact that they were found in or near the River Siris, in Southern Italy. These two pieces, which are said to be the finest examples extant of toreutic or highly finished metallic work in relief, are respectively 6½ in. and 7 in. high, and were intended for the shoulder-piece of a cuirass.

They represent a combat between a Greek warrior and an Amazon, and some people have endeavoured to identify the Greek as Ajax, but no definite decision has been arrived at on this point. Brönsted, in describing them, says that while "the relief is extremely prominent, so that some of the most salient parts, as the hands, the thighs, the knees of the figures, the shields, and some portions of the draperies, appear to be almost detached from the ground; nevertheless, all is gained upon the plate itself." The relief is so strong in places—for example, in the heads—that the plate is only as thick as thin note-paper, and on the reverse side cavities may be seen nearly an inch deep. The beauty and value of these two pieces were

sufficiently recognised at the time of their finding to induce several people to band together to purchase them in 1835 for £1,000, a price considered enormous in those days, and to present them to the National Collection. They have since greatly appreciated in value, as all other great bronzes have, and it is probable they would each fetch from £2,000 to £3,000 could they be sold to-morrow. At a rough estimate one might certainly put down the Museum collection of bronzes at a round million sterling, without any fear of being found to overstep the bounds of propriety or exactness.

Another of our illustrations is the famous Marlborough Cameo, which has the reputation of being the third largest in the world, being exceeded in size only by one specimen in the museum at Vienna and one in the Louvre. When some few years ago the Blenheim collection was sold this was, it is understood, one of the chief articles desired by the Museum authorities, who eventually paid £3,500 for it. A bargain it must certainly be held to be, since there is a story told that until a day or two before the sale one of the richest collectors in the world was



ONE OF THE SIRIS BRONZES—ESTIMATED VALUE £2,000 TO £3,000.



THE MARLBOROUGH CAMEO—FOR WHICH £7,000 WAS OFFERED.

anxious to purchase it, and was prepared to pay no less than £7,000 to secure it. What caused the change of mind no one knows, but the collector stood aside and allowed the treasure to be bought for the nation.

This cameo represents an Emperor and Empress. The white of the stone is one of the finest ever seen in such a gem, while its treatment is brilliantly correct in its detail and in showing the different layers of the sardonyx. It is true to the best traditions of the cameo-maker's art, but it was undoubtedly executed by a workman who, finished as he was, had not the genius of him who carved the other and better-known cameo of Augustus, which ignores the coloured layer of the sardonyx entirely, and relies for its effect on the keeping only of the white part of the stone, which is treated with a skill which baffles the imitation even of the workers of to-day. Indeed, all the great cameo work belongs to the Augustine age, as the large cameos were executed either in his day or in those of his immediate successor. Near the cameo is a relic of the great Napoleon which is worth many thousands of pounds—the snuff-box whose general outlines are sufficiently shown in the illustration. Its history is told by the inscription on the lid of the gold box in which it was contained. This box was given by the Emperor Napoleon of France to the Hon. Anne Seymour Damer as a "souvenir," the word he used, in consequence of her having presented him with a bust of Mr. Fox executed in marble by herself. The bust had been promised at the peace of Amiens, was finished in 1812, and sent to France, where it remained, but was not presented till May 1st, 1815, when by command of His Imperial Majesty Anne Seymour Damer had an audience for that

purpose at the Palais Elysée, where the Emperor then resided.

Downstairs, near the centre of one of the chief galleries, is the Rosetta Stone, whose value, measured by its scientific worth, must be acknowledged even by the most practical to vastly exceed any money which could be paid for it. As most people know, it furnished the basis of our present imperfect, but nevertheless great, knowledge of the life, civilization, and history of Ancient Egypt. It came into our possession as the result of one of those accidents which have so often favoured us, for it was loaded on to a French vessel which sailed from one of the Egyptian ports in the last year of the eighteenth century. On the way, so the story goes, the vessel was boarded and captured by one of our frigates, and the Rosetta Stone was sent home by the captain, who did a greater deed than he imagined, for his act opened up an unknown store of knowledge to the world—the Rosetta Stone having on one surface the same inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphs, demotic or cursive Egyptian writing, and Greek characters.

I have to acknowledge a difficulty in appraising its value, for one expert smiled at my idea of £50,000, while another voted for £100,000, and a third for a quarter of a million sterling, to which last figure it is by no means improbable the bidding could be forced.



THE NAPOLEON SNUFF-BOX—WORTH SEVERAL THOUSAND POUNDS.

Some little distance away are the great Nineveh Bulls with human heads. One of these, as is seen in the illustration, is represented with five feet, not because of any mythological idea that these bulls were endowed with an extra leg, but in order to increase the symmetrical appearance when viewed from the front or side.

These bulls, which have under their bodies cuneiform inscriptions recording the name and title of Sardon, King of Syria (B.C. 722



ONE OF THE NINEVEH BULLS—ESTIMATED VALUE £25,000.

to 705), and briefly describe certain of his building operations and his wars and conquests, were supposed to represent supernatural beings, and were erected at the doors of palaces to "protect the footsteps of the King their builder," to quote the inscription. They would, undoubtedly, be cheap at £50,000; and the Assyrian lions with wings and human heads, which may be seen not far off, would undoubtedly bring as much.

The great Sarcophagus of Nectanebus, made of black basalt, would fetch at least £50,000, while that of Ankh-nes-ne-fer-a-bra is even more valuable still—coffins expensive enough to satisfy even the yearnings of a multi-millionaire with Oriental tendencies.

Upstairs, in the rooms next to that in which the mummies are exhibited, there is a wealth of millions in the cylinders of various

sorts, and in small articles to which most people give a cursory glance and pass on, merely because they have no knowledge of what they represent.

In the Nineveh Gallery downstairs are the Creation Tablets, as they are called, which record the history of the Creation and caused so much excitement when they were discovered by the late George Smith. One comes to them as to a dead wall of value, for they represent a

wealth of civilization and knowledge in rational thought which no mere consideration of money can possibly appraise. Whoever would buy them at the auction of the world, which may possibly take place when Macaulay's New Zealander comes on his memorable sketching tour, must bring with him a blank cheque and have a certified balance at his bank running into millions.

Upstairs another set of exceedingly valuable cylinders is a series of five, which cover a hundred years of the most important part of the second Assyrian Empire, and are certainly worth not less than £100,000. All the cuneiform tablets in the Museum are said to number at least 100,000, and, excluding the Creation Tablets and taking the big

with the small, could not be averaged at less than £10 each, so that their value is at least a round million. A quarter of this sum would in addition be probably fetched by the Egyptian Papyri of the Books of the Dead, of which there are at least twenty good ones dating back to 1500 B.C. Of the other papyri the Harris Papyrus, which records the reign of Rameses III. and is 130ft. long, is certainly worth £25,000.

In a large case along one side of the wall may be seen a lot of blue Egyptian porcelain. It covers a development in the art of at least a couple of thousand years, and is worth not less than £200,000. It is difficult to avoid the appearance of a catalogue when each article has an almost unique interest, but the seeker for the curious should certainly not omit to notice the model of a granary of the

Sixth Dynasty, which dates back to 3500 B.C., and is the only specimen to be found in any of the museums of Europe; while there is a weight in the shape of a bull with the name of a King of an early dynastic era engraved on it, for which one is compelled to decline to set any value, as it also is unique. A gate-socket of King Entemena, who reigned 4500 years B.C., must startle those who adhere to the strict chronology of the Bible. His record carries us beyond the Bible days, and many people have stood aghast at the hardihood of the authorities in thus putting themselves in conflict with Archbishop Usher, even though the mummied remains of the neolithic man are cause for still greater wonder.

In the Library, with its forty miles and more of bookshelves, no one even to-day has the faintest idea of the exact number of books. They certainly number at least two millions, and year by year they increase at a well-nigh incredible rate, seeing that close on, if not quite, 10,000 pieces of printed matter, using that objectionable term to cover all the books received by the department, are added every month to the collection. Its great glory—certainly the most valuable book in the almost priceless list of the possessions under the control of the Chief Librarian—is the "Codex Alexandrinus," one of the three great codices of the world, the other two being the "Codex Vaticanus," in the library of the Vatican, and the "Codex Sinaiticus," at St. Petersburg.

The Alexandrinus, whose name was derived from the fact that it was brought from Alexandria by Cyril when he was Patriarch of the See, an office he held from 1602 till 1621, was a present from the then Sultan of Turkey to Charles I. It is a wonderful piece of work, and the manuscript is now bound in four volumes. Three of them contain the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, in an almost complete form, while the fourth volume contains the New Testament, with, however, "several lamentable" defects. It is

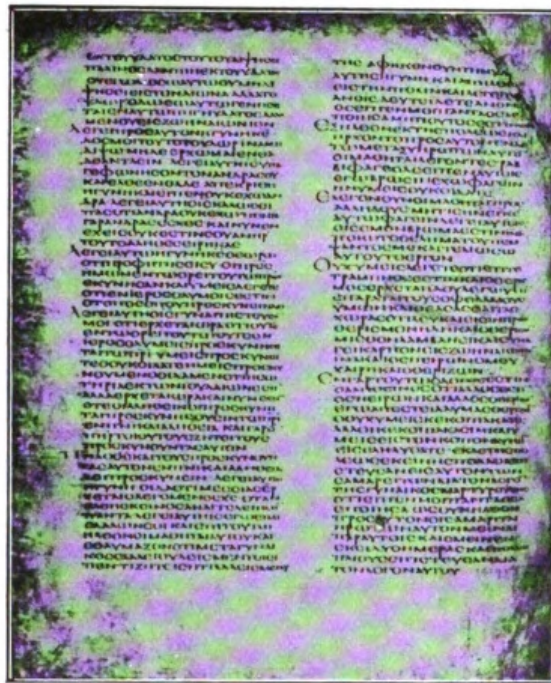
in quarto form, 12¾ in. high by 10¼ in. broad, and consists of 773 leaves, of which 639 contain the Old Testament. Each page contains two columns of fifty or fifty-one lines; each line has in it twenty or more letters, which are written without any space between the words, and the only punctuation is a point at the end of a sentence, with a vacant space at the end of a paragraph. The value of the Codex would be at least half a million sterling, and there is no knowing but that the bidding might force it to an even larger figure than the conservative one I have named.

From half a million sterling to £5,000 may seem a ridiculous drop, but when one thinks of that sum as the price of a single book it is sufficiently startling even in these days of high prices. At that sum is valued the "Mainz Psalter," the second book known to have been printed that bears a date.

Caxton's "Game and Playe of Chesse," which was supposed to have been the first book printed in England, is now believed to have been printed in Bruges about 1475, and the "Dictes and Sayengs of the Philosophers," which is not accepted as having been the first book printed in England

after Caxton's removal from Bruges in 1477, would be cheap at £1,000 each. At the same price the "Life of Our Lady," by John Lydgate, dating back to 1484, and "Godfrey of Boulogne," to 1481, are set down, while the "Fifteen Odes and Other Prayers," the only one printed with ornamented borders, would fetch from £200 to £500 more. The Mazarin Bible would cost anyone £4,000, while Coverdale's Bible, though valued at only a quarter of that sum, would need a pretty rich man to add it to his collection.

The books printed by Caxton, the father of printing in England, it need hardly be said, represent to the Museum a fortune in themselves, seeing that the "Recuyell of the Historiyes of Troy," the first book printed in the English language, is valued at £2,000,



THE CODEX ALEXANDRINUS—WORTH ABOUT £500,000.

and might fetch £3,000, as might any of the Caxtons mentioned above, including the "Book of the Tales of Canterbury," printed at Westminster about 1478. There are something like sixty different books printed by Caxton in the Library, and as most of them are in duplicate they number in the aggregate between 100 and 120, so that even at £500 apiece, a very cheap average, they represent a total of considerably over £50,000.

Did anyone want an object-lesson of the way in which modern printing has enabled our generation to enjoy the greatest literature of the past one need go no farther than Shakespeare, all of whose works can be bought now for a shilling. The plays in quarto form, each a complete volume in itself, are all in the Museum, and each volume is worth from £200 to £500, while a first folio containing all the plays ranges in value from £800

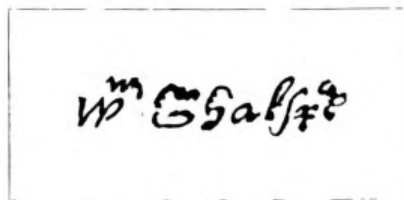
to £1,500, a second folio from £100 up, and a third folio from £300 up. And what shall be said to a copy of "Æsop's Fables" which is priced at £1,000, and "Robinson Crusoe" and the "Pilgrim's Progress" at £100 each? In the matter of books, indeed, one might write on indefinitely, for one has only to recall such modern instances as the "Kelmescott Press," an enduring memorial of the genius of William Morris, as long as books and book-lovers live, a complete set of which is worth £500 to £600, and the sale of Rudyard Kipling's "School Boy Lyrics" at £131 within the last two or three years to suggest the enormous wealth of this department alone.

And what shall I say of the autograph collection of the Museum, with its examples of the writings of practically all the great names in the world's history? The gem of the collection, as will be universally admitted,

is the autograph of Shakespeare, the greatest name in the whole of England's history. The Museum boasts only one indisputable specimen of the writing of him who wrote more than most men in his life, and yet, of all that writing, only five or six specimens of his name are extant, one of which is at the Guildhall and three are at Somerset House. A copy of Montaigne's Essays, 1603, with an autograph of Shakespeare is also preserved here, but although its genuineness has been strenuously defended, among others by the late Sir Frederick Madden, it is not now believed to be genuine, as is certainly the signature of Ben Jonson in another copy of the same book. Could



SPECIMEN PAGE OF SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST FOLIO— THIS VOLUME IS WORTH FROM £800 TO £1,500.



SHAKESPEARE'S AUTOGRAPH.

one imagine an auctioneer in his pulpit saying to the assembled multitude, "The next lot is the autograph of William Shakespeare," the excitement in the room would be extraordinary. Indeed, were such a sale probable, it would no doubt have to be conducted in the Albert Hall, or some similar place, in order to accommodate not only the bidders from all over the world, but those who would be drawn to see the sale. Expert opinion leads to the belief that the bidding would begin at not less than £1,000, and when one reflects that Stratford-on-Avon is the Mecca of thousands of rich Americans every year, because it contains the—to them—most hallowed dust in the world, it needs



THE BRISTOL CUP—A TEA-CUP WORTH £100.

no imagination to see the richest men combining to secure so unique a treasure for one of the museums on the "other side," and running the bidding up to £10,000 or £15,000, or more—unless some of the multimillionaires conceived the idea of purchasing it for themselves, in which case there is no knowing to what limit sentiment would lead them.

Among the more ordinary mortals, the writing of the Hero of the Nile probably occupies the second place, for an autograph of Nelson would fetch from £50 to £200 or so, while £100 would be the market value of Cardinal Wolsey, from £50 to £60 a fair price for Swift, at which figure might be placed two such dissimilar personages as Shelley, the sweet singer, and George Washington, the father of his country, whose juvenile veracity has passed into a proverb by reason of its uniqueness. Of the authors of our own time, autograph letters of Dickens and Thackeray are each worth about £14, while Sir Walter Scott is valued at rather less and Lord Byron at about £10. Among the painters, Gainsborough, Hogarth, and Reynolds each fetch from £40 to £50, while the autographs of the famous diarists Pepys and Evelyn would command from £10 to £20.

Among the Sovereigns of England there are no autographs before the time of Henry V., for the monarch's seal was the equivalent of his signature, which historians assure us could not, in those pre-School Board days, always be written with pen and ink even by those who ruled over the dynasties of the Empire. Of the other Sovereigns, the best-known signatures are those of Henry VIII., Elizabeth, and Charles I., which would bring

from £10 to £50 each; while, by reason of the sentiment which clusters around her name and her unfortunate end, the writing of Marie Antoinette is valued at £70.

Already the space allotted to an article has been filled, and yet no mention has been made of the collection of prints, the Rembrandts alone of which are worth £100,000; the glass and china, in which one single tea-cup and saucer, known as the Bristol Cup, cost £100, so that the whole set would make a nice little present; the helmets, armour, and articles of vertu, among which a pair of stirrups made for a King of Hungary have been priced at £2,700; the enamels, some specimens of which are worth anywhere up to £10,000; or the manuscripts, among the treasures of which may be named the Bedford "Book of Hours," which a man would be reasonably lucky to buy for £10,000; or the coins, of which there are at least a quarter of a million sterling. The most valuable of these last is probably the Juxon Medal, which was given by Charles I. on the



THE JUXON MEDAL, GIVEN BY CHARLES I. TO BISHOP JUXON ON THE SCAFFOLD—PURCHASED FOR £700.

scaffold to the Bishop who attended him on that occasion, and was bought for £700. Perhaps the most valuable of the rest is the Petition Crown, as it is called, a specimen of



THE PETITION CROWN—VALUE UNKNOWN.

the work of Thomas Simon, who submitted it to Charles II. as being better work than that produced by the officer who was then at the Mint, and at the same time petitioning to be restored to the office he held under Cromwell. Original from