

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORY OF PEARLS

THE use of pearls as jewels and their recognition as objects of value date back into the far beyond when the histories of ancient peoples were transcribed upon papyrus. It is very likely that pearls were amongst the earliest gems known to man, and this is not surprising when one considers that the earliest dwellers by the sea probably fed upon the shellfish which produce such objects.

The modern recognition of the pearl dates back to about 300 B.C. and was due, no doubt, to the mad desire of the Romans for luxury and treasure ; but although pearls seem to have played a less conspicuous part in Ancient Greece and Egypt, they were known to yet older peoples, and especially to those of the East. The Old Testament only refers to pearls once, in the book of Job (chap. xxviii), where it is written, "No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls ; for the price of wisdom is above rubies." None of the terms, however, refer with any certainty to the objects now known by such names. The names of gems

in the scriptures have probably arisen during the many translations and rewritings of the books.

In the New Testament, on the other hand, constant reference is made to pearls. There are, however, traditions which refer to the ancient Hebrews having knowledge of the true value of the gem.

In the Indian Seas pearls were known many centuries before Christ. Perhaps first collected as mere curiosities or as objects of some superstitious regard, they gradually became articles of greater and greater value, and the proud possessions of the Princes of the East. References occur in the literature of India which are of considerable antiquity. Pearls are mentioned in the books of the Brahmans (about 500 B.C.) and are associated in Hindu literature with Krishna.

The Chinese records go still further back and Kunz and Stevenson relate that a book, the Shu King (2350—625 B.C.), states that in the 23rd century B.C. Yü received as tribute, oyster pearls from the river Hwai. The early Chinese pearls were evidently taken from fresh-water molluscs.

The pearl fisheries of Ceylon and also of India and the Persian Gulf, must be of very great antiquity, but when and by whom discovered, are questions the answers to which are buried in the annals of the past. It is highly probable that the fishing was carried on 2000 years ago, in much the same simple

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way as at present. The fishing of Ceylon was referred to by Pliny, who stated that the island of Ceylon was the most productive of pearls of all parts of the world. According to Herdman the Singhalese records go back still further, and quoting from his valuable report—a mine of information about the fishing of Ceylon—we read that “According to the ‘Mahawanso,’ pearls figure in the list of native products sent as a present from King Vigáya of Ceylon to his Indian father-in-law, in about 540—550 B.C.”; and again when in B.C. 306 King Devanampiyabissa sent an embassy to India the presents are said to have included eight kinds of Ceylon pearls.

Pearls were almost certainly known to the Persians seven centuries before Christ; they are not mentioned, but pearl ornaments of very great antiquity have been found in Persian remains.

The ancient Egyptians used mother of pearl, according to Kunz and Stevenson, as early as the 6th dynasty—3200 B.C., but they do not seem to have regarded the pearl as being valuable until very much later times.

As for the Greeks, they too knew the pearl and recognised its value. The gems are mentioned in the writings of Theophrastus and they are described as being the products of shellfish. Pliny also refers to the writings of the Greeks. Three centuries before Christ a great change in the story seems to have

taken place. The Roman empire was beginning to rise and very soon this mighty power became involved in wars with those countries where the knowledge of the pearl was general and its value as treasure was recognised. By 50 B.C. the pearl had become very popular in Rome. The Romans were indeed strangely affected by pearls, and the gem was adopted as a kind of fetish—a sign of pomp and luxury. The value of the pearl became extraordinarily great and laws were made forbidding the wearing of pearls by individuals who had not attained to a certain rank. Dresses were simply covered with the gem and even animals wore necklaces. It is often said that the presence of pearls in the molluscs of the rivers of the British Islands, played some part in bringing Julius Caesar to our shores. It is certain that in those days the pearl was fished in England and in this respect the following quotations are interesting :

From Caius Plinius Secundus.

In Britain, it is certain that small and badly coloured pearls are found, since the Emperor Julius wished it to be understood that the breastplate which he dedicated to Venus Genetrix in her temple was made of British pearls. Lib. ix. 557.

From Caius Julius Solinus.

Dat et India margaritas, dat et litus Britannicum ; sicut divus Julius thoracem, quem Veneri Genetrix in templum ejus dicavit, ex Britannicis margaritis factum, subjecta inscriptione testatus est. C. L. iii.

From Tacitus.

Britain bears gold, silver and other metals as the reward of

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victory, the ocean also produces pearls, but dull coloured and dirty brown. C. C. Taciti *de vitu Agricolae* c. 5.

From Aelian.

The best [pearl] is the Indian, and that of the Red Sea. It is produced also in the western ocean where lies the Brettanic island; but appears in a measure rather golden coloured having rays somewhat dull and dusky. Juba says it is found also in the Gulf near the Bosphorus, but that it is inferior to the Brettanic.

Aeliani de Natura Animalium lib. xv. c. 8.

From Origen.

But they hold the second rank, as among pearls, do those which are taken from the ocean near Britain. They say that the pearl obtained near Britain is golden coloured on its surface but cloudy and rather dull in its rays; but that which is gotten from the Bay near the Bosphorus is more cloudy than the Brettanic.

Orig. Comment. in Mattheum, Delarue t. II. 448—50.

Most of the above writers seem to have regarded the British pearl as inferior to the pearls of the Orient. The Venerable Bede speaks more highly of the English pearls, and writes :

“—among which are mussels in which they often find enclosed pearls of all the best colours—that is, both red and purple, jacynth and green, but principally white.”

So did Britain in these times play its part in the production of gems, which the makers of history regarded as of first importance.

The Romans used the name *margaritae* (of the Greeks), for pearls, but the term *Unio* was also common in Rome. Pliny explains the term *Unio*

as meaning that each pearl was unique, but other theories have been put forward to explain this name.

After the fall of Rome and the scattering of its treasures, we find that pearls once more become objects of great value with the rise of another conquering race. Byzantium or Constantinople became the centre and capital of this new "Empire of the East," and with the development of life and luxury arose the desire for adornment which was even more gorgeous than that of the Romans. The treasures of Rome however had been scattered far and wide and the pearl travelled far over Europe even to the ancient cities of Gaul. Then we find that as the Franks, too, became a prosperous and conquering race under Charlemagne, the pearl again came into great favour with the rich and powerful. Later, when learning became the chief object in life and books the greatest treasure, the pearl was chosen to make beautiful the bindings of these books. Many of them were most splendid and costly. One, the Ashburnham manuscript of the Four Gospels, which long ago belonged to the Abbey of Canonesses on Lake Constance, is now in the possession of Mr Pierpoint Morgan. This MS. was bound about 896—899 A.D. by order of the Emperor Arnulf of the Carolingian dynasty, and according to Kunz and Stevenson has 98 pearls on it, all of which came probably from rivers in Europe.

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After the 8th century, as the idea began to grow that man was the centre of the universe,—that the world was made for man,—a new use was found for pearls. It was thought that all things which grew naturally, were of direct use in helping to keep the body sound and healthy. Hence we find that many of our common herbs and lowly plants came to be used as medicine, and they were used for whatever their shape or colour suggested. So we get the origin of the “kidney” bean, and the “liver”-wort. The pearl seemed so beautiful and pure that the idea arose that it too must be of some value in this respect. So we find that the small seed pearls were used as medicine, sometimes ground into powder, sometimes swallowed whole.

It was not until about the 12th century that pearls were used in England, for the Anglo-Saxons were not artistic, in the lavish manner of more southern races. All through the 13th and 14th centuries pearls were extremely fashionable over the whole of Europe as ornaments for both men and women. They were conspicuous too in church decoration, so that from the spoil which Henry VIII obtained when many of the churches were plundered, he came into possession of numerous and costly pearls.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, pearls came into still greater favour than before. Many of the German cities revived the old restrictions of the

Romans and no maiden or married woman was allowed to wear the gem ; later they were restricted to one pearl chaplet. There were many laws and regulations as to their use by knights, the most stringent being in Venice.

It was not only by the inhabitants of the Old World that pearls were discovered, for Columbus found that pearl fishing was carried on in the Gulf of Mexico, and quantities of pearls have been found in the Indian mounds, either loose or strung for necklaces and wristlets. Some were mounted in quaint and primitive fashion, all showing that in the days of swarming game and roving tribes of untrammelled savages, their queens wore pearls even as they are now worn by their fair successors. The old Spanish traders obtained pearls, by fair means and foul, from the ancient treasures of the Aztec kings. America was even known in Cadiz as the "Land of Pearls," and the gem is still fished in the Caribbean Sea, along the West Coast of Central America, and on the Pearl Islands in the Bay of Panama.

It is surprising how little was known in the very ancient days about the pearl-producing shellfish, when the pearl itself was known so well. The gems were thought by the Incas to be the "eggs" of the animal. In the time of Alexander, a writer of Mytilene in the island of Lesbos, says "In the Indian sea, off the coasts of Armenia, Persia, Susiana and Babylonia,

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a fish like an oyster is caught, from the flesh of which men pick out white *bones*, called by them ‘pearls.’”

In Britain the most important pearl fishing was carried on in Scotland. As early as 1355 A.D. Scotch pearls are referred to in a Statute of the goldsmiths of Paris. In the reign of Charles II the pearl trade was sufficiently important to attract the attention of Parliament, and for many years a large number of pearls were “cultivated.”

In 1705, we find a pearl merchant named John Spruel saying that he had been dealing in pearls for forty years but could never sell Scotch pearls in Scotland, he could only sell oriental specimens. The latter were always preferred although he could show much harder and better Scotch specimens. (This appears in an account current betwixt Scotland and England, Edinburgh 1705.) In 1860 the Scottish pearl fishery was revived by a German named Moritz Unger. He visited Scotland and bought pearls from the peasants. This resulted in a vigorous search for the gems, and in 1865 we find that the total value of the pearls sold was about £1,200. This price, however, was not maintained, as the rivers were over-fished. Now, pearls are only found irregularly in the Spey, Tay, and South Esk, and to a less extent in the Doon, Dee, Don and Forth.

Pearls have also been found in Wales, chiefly in molluscs taken from the river Conway. One

of these Conway pearls was given to the queen of Charles II by her chamberlain, Sir Richard Wynn. The specimen is now believed to occupy a place in the British regalia.

During the whole of the 18th century pearls were somewhat scarce, both the Ceylon and Red Sea fisheries being unproductive. The most plentiful supplies came from the Persian Gulf and from fresh-water shellfish. At this period, however, diamonds became fashionable owing to the discovery of new methods of cutting and preparing them. In spite of this rival, the pearl still continued in favour and by the end of the 19th century it was more sought after and more valuable than ever.

During this century there were discoveries of pearl banks off newly settled countries, as for example, Australia, and in this country they became one of the sources of wealth to the colonists. The growing value of the pearl is not due therefore to a decrease in the source of supply but to an ever-increasing demand for a gem which never seems out of place for personal adornment or in any scheme of decoration.