Tracing the Myth of the Jewel in the Toad's Head

TO what jewel or precious stone was Shakespeare alluding when he makes the exiled duke in "As You Like It" (after praising his rough life in the forest of Arden, and declaring that adversity has its compensations) exclaim:

"The toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head."

No doubt the unprejudiced reader supposes when he reads this passage that there is some stone or stone-like body in the head of the toad which has a special beauty, or else was believed to possess magical or medicinal properties. And it is probabe that Shakespeare himself did suppose that such a stone existed.

As a matter of fact, there is no stone or "jewel" of any kind in the head of the common toad, nor of any species of toad—common or rare. This is a simple and certain result of the careful examination of the heads of innumerable toads, and is not merely "common knowledge," but actually the last word of the scientific expert. In these days of "nature study" writers familiar with toads and frogs and kindred beasts have puzzled over Shakespeare's words, and suggested that he was really referring to the beautiful eyes of the toad, which are like gems in color and brilliance.

This, however, is not the case Shakespeare himself was simply making use of what was considered to be "common knowledge" in his day when he made the duke compare adversity to the toad with a magic jewel in its head, commonly known as "a toadstone," although that "common knowledge" was really not knowledge at all, but—like an enormous mass of the accepted current statements of those times, about animals, plants and stones—was an absolutely baseless invention. Such baseless beliefs were due to the perfectly innocent but reckless habit of mankind, throughout long ages, of exaggerating and building up marvelous narrations on the one hand, and on the other hand of believing without any sufficient inquiry, and with delight and enthusiasm, such marvelous narrations recorded by others. Each writer or "gossip" concerning the wonders of unexplored nature, consciously or unconsciously, added a little to the story as received by him, and so the authoritative statements as to marvels grew more and more astonishing and interesting.

SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY.

It was not until the time of Shakespeare himself that another spirit began to assert itself—namely, that of asking whether a prevalent belief or tradition is actually a true statement of fact, and of proceeding to test the belief by an examination of the thing in question, and not by merely adducing the assertions of "the learned so-and-so," or of "the ingenious Mr. Dash."

In the seventeenth century the opposition to this method of omnivorous credulity (which even today, in spite of all our "progress," flourishes among both the rich and the poor) crystalized in the purpose of the Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge—whose motto was, and is, "Nullius in verba" (that is, "We accept no man's bare assertion"), and whose original first rule, to be observed at its meetings, was that no one should discourse his opinions or narrate a marvel, but that any member who wished to address the society should "bring in," that is to say, "exhibit" an experiment or an actual specimen.

A new spirit, the "scientific" spirit, produced and was nourished by this and similar societies of learned men. As a consequence the absurdities and the cruel and injurious beliefs of witchcraft, astrology and baseless legend melted away like clouds before the rising sun. In the place of the mad nightmare of fantastic ignorance, there grew up the solid body of unassailable knowledge of nature and of man which we call "science"—a growth which made such prodigious strides in the last century that we now may be truly said to live in the presence of a new heaven and a new earth!

It was, then, a real "stone," called the toadstone, to which Shakespeare alluded. It is mentioned in various old treatises concerning the magical and medicinal properties of gems and stones under its Latin name, "Bufonius lapis," and was also called Borax, Nosa, Crapondinus, Crapaudina, Chelonitis and Batrachites. It was also called Graterlano and Garatronius, after a gentleman named Gratterus, who in 1472 found a very large one, reputed to have marvelous power. In 1657, in the "translation by a person of quality" of the "Thaumatographia" of a Polish physician named Jonstonus, we find written of it:

"Toads produce a stone, with their own image sometimes. It hath very great force against malignant tumors that are venomous. They are used to heat it in a bag and to lay it hot, without anything between, to the naked body, and to rub the affected place with it. They say it prevails against inchantments of witches, especially for women and children bewitched. So soon as you apply it to one bewitched it sweats many drops. In the plague it is laid to the heart to strengthen it." Another physician of the same period (see "Notes and Queries," fourth series, volume 7, 1871, page 540) appears to be affected by the new spirit of inquiry, for he relates the old traditions about the stone and how he tested them.

THE TOAD WOULDN'T GIVE UP.

He says it was reported that the stone could be cut out of the toad's head. (In the book called "Hortus Sanitatis," dated 1490, there is a picture, now before me, of a gentleman performing this operation successfully on a gigantic toad.) Our Skeptical physician, however, goes on to say that it was commonly believed that these stones are thrown out of the mouth by old toads (probably the tongue was mistaken for the stone), and that if toads are placed on a piece of red cloth they will eject their "toadstones," but rapidly swallow them again before one can seize the precious gem!

He says that when he was a boy he procured an aged toad and placed it on a red cloth in order to obtain possession of "the stone." He sat up watching the toad all night, but the toad did not eject anything. "Since that time," he says, "I have always regarded as humbug ('badineries') all that they relate of the toadstone and of its origin." He then describes the actual stone which passes as the toadstone, or Bufonius lapis, and says that it is also called batrachite, or brontia, or ombria. His description exactly corresponds with the "toadstones" which are well known at the present day in collections of old rings.

I have examined 12 of these rings in the British Museum, through the kindness of Mr. C. H. Read, F. S. A., the keeper of mediaeval antiquities, and four in the Ashmolean museum at Oxford. Two of these are of chalcedony, with a figure of a toad roughly carved on the stone, and are of a character and origin different from the others. The others, which are the true and recognized "toadstone" or "lapis Bufonis," are circular, slightly convex "stones," of a drab color and with a smooth, enamel-like surface. They are platelike discs, being of thin substance and concave on the lower surface, which has an upstanding rim.

I recognized them at once as the palatal teeth of a fossil fish called "Lepidotus," common in our own and oolitic and wealden strata. They were white and colorless in life, but are stained of various colors according to the nature of the rock in which they are imbedded. A drab color like that of the skin of the common toad is given to them by the iron salts present in many oolitic rocks; those found in the wealden of the Isle of Wight are black.

That the "toad-stones" mounted in ancient rings are really the teeth of a fish has been already recorded by the Rev. R. H. Newell ("The Zoology of the English Poets," 1845), but he seems to be mistaken in identifying them with those of the wolf-fish (Anarrhicas). They undoubtedly are the palatal teeth of the fossil extinct ganoid fish Lepidotus.

Before leaving the queer inventions and assertions of the old writers about these fossil teeth, which they declared to be taken out of the toad's head, let me quote one delightful passage from a contemporary of Shakespeare (Lupton, "A thousand notable things of sundry sortes. Whereof some are wonderful, some strange, some pleasant, divers necessary, a great sort profitable and many very precious," London, 1595).

"You shall know," he says, "whether the Toadstone called 'crapaudina' be the right and perfect stone or not. Hold the stone before a toad, so that he may see it. And if it be a right and true stone the toad will leap toward it and make as though he would snatch it from you; he envieth so much that a man should have that stone. This was credibly told Mizaldus for truth by one of the French king's physicians, which affirmed that he did see the trial thereof."

We have thus before us the actual things called toad-stones, and believed by Shakespeare and his contemporaries to be found in the head of the toad. How did it come about that these pretty little button-like, drab-colored fossil teeth were given such an erroneous history? This question was answered by the late Rev. C. W. King, Fellow of Trinity college, Cambridge, in his book on "Antique Gems" (London, 1860).

He says: "I am not aware if any substance of a stony nature is ever now discovered within the head or body of the toad. Probably the whole story originated in the name Batrachites (Frog-stone or Toad-stone), given in Pliny to a gem brought from Coptos, and so called from its resemblance to that animal in color."

We have not, it must be noted, any specimens of the toadstone at the present day actually known to have been brought from Coptos. It is quite possible that the fossil fish-tooth was substituted ages ago for Pliny's Batrachites, and was never found at Coptos at all! Whether that is so or not, the fact is that Pliny never said it came out of a toad, but merely that it was of the color of a toad.

The Pliny referred to is Pliny the Elder, the celebrated Roman naturalist who wrote a great treatise on natural history, which we still possess, and died in A. D. 79 whilst visiting the eruption of Vesuvius. He says nothing of the Batrachites being found inside the toad, nor does he mention its medicinal virtues. The name alone—simply the name "Batrachites," the Greek for toad-stone—was sufficient to lead the fertile imagination of the mediaeval doctors to invent all the other particulars.—Sir Ray Lankester, G. C. B., F. R. S. in N. Y. American.

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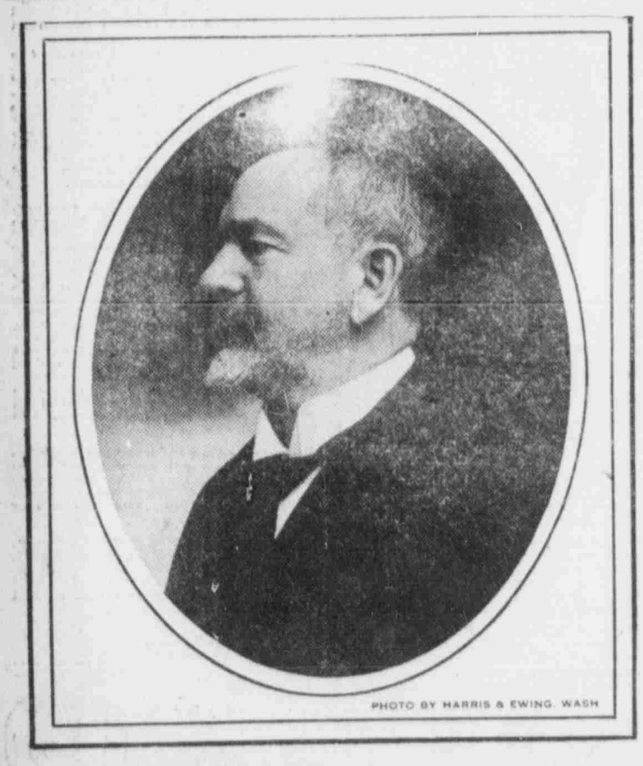
VANDALISM.

The apparently motiveless criminal who delights in damaging ancient works of art is a phychological mystery. The last exploit of this modern form of vandalism was performed a few days ago at the Cluny museum, in Paris. The object of attack was an ancient tapestry, dating from the end of the 16th century, and depicting the Battle of Jornac, when the Duke of Anjou defeated the Huguenots under Conde and Coligny, March 13, 1569. The piece, much deteriorated by time, was to be found in the old chamber of the Order of the Holy Spirit, near the case showing the mantles and insignia of this body. The miscreant who wished to place his mark on the tapestry, did so by making a downward cut about six inches in length with a sharp knife. He accomplished his design undetected and the damage was only discovered during the final tour of inspection after the museum had been closed for the day.—Dundee Advertiser.



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German and Irish Satin Damasks—2 yards wide in scroll, fluer de lis, satin stripes, plain center effects, spot empire, daisy and holly patterns—For one day at a yard— **$1.23**

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Filet, imitation, cluny and hemstitched effects, for one day at a pair— **98c**

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20c White Flaxons, White India Linons
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The best made—for one day at each— **17½c**

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For double beds, white and colored—for one day at each— **$1.10**

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$1.50 Battenberg DRESSER SCARFS
Embroidered Dresser Scarfs,—Mexican Tray Cloths, and Mexican squares—for one day at each— **77c**

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12 1-2c Dress Ginghams
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A special lot of all wool dress goods, 44 to 46 inches wide, including Prunellas, Granites, poplins and others in all new and staple colorings. Values up to $1.65, sale price, per yard **$1.10**
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35c AND 40c
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White English Long Cloth
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Regular $2 Grade AUTO SCARFS at 99c.
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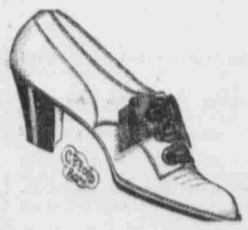

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