CHAPTER III

The Quality Stamp—"Let the Buyer Beware!"

Since gold and silver have been used in coinage for many centuries, it is natural that their stamping or marking should be regulated by law. Such laws are not only a protection to the purchaser, but are of equal value to the manufacturers because they sustain public confidence in the industry. Regulations for the platinum metals are of more recent date.

Everyone who handles precious metal articles should understand these laws thoroughly. Thus the manufacturer must keep his alloys high enough to meet the law, but not so unduly high as to jeopardize his profits. The retail jeweler, who is equally liable before the law, does well to check the goods he sells and to give attention to the reputation of the manufacturers from whom he buys. The metal buyer, in his turn, has good reasons for observing and interpreting the various stamps. For example, if an article is marked "10-k," he need not waste time testing it against the 12-k needle. Also, he should familiarize himself with the trademarks of the various manufacturers, and observe which, if any, are associated with sub-standard goods. Finally, all groups must understand the meaning of "tolerance" in marking, which will be explained shortly.

BRITISH HALL MARKS

The marking of gold jewelry began in England in the fourteenth century. The Goldsmiths' Company, incorporated in 1327, and certain other Guilds, found it necessary to organize for the protection of their craft and of the public against fraud. They had, among other functions, that of testing gold and silver articles at their several Halls. A small sample was cut from each piece and assayed, and the article then received four or more stamps, including the quality mark, a town mark, a date letter (changed each year) and a maker's mark. Various symbols were used, such
as a leopard's head, a crown, a lion, and the like. Goods made between 1784 and 1890 also carried a duty mark indicating that a certain tax had been paid. Stamping was not compulsory, and small articles were not always marked. It should be noted that

**13 CARAT GOLD.**

![Image of 13 carat gold hallmark]

**9 CARAT GOLD.**

![Image of 9 carat gold hallmark]

**STANDARD SILVER.**

![Image of standard silver hallmark]

*Some British Hall marks. These were used by the Birmingham Assay Office.*

these marks were impressed not by the maker, as in the United States of America, but by the Guild Halls, after assay. Hall marking has been the subject of a considerable literature, which is well worth the study of the antiquarian and historian.

**AMERICAN LAWS AND STANDARDS**

In this country the manufacturer himself, subject to law, is permitted to affix quality marks and trademarks to his goods. The United States National Stamping Law, covering falsely or spuriously stamped articles made of gold or silver or their alloys, was enacted June 13, 1906. The text may be found in almost any law library or big public library. (Ask for Rev. Stat. U. S., vol. 34, pt. 1, p. 260, 59th Cong., 1st Sess., Public Law 226.)

Handy and Harman, silver dealers at 82 Fulton Street, New York, sell a reference book called *Handy Book for Manufacturers*, which contains, among other useful facts, the full text of the law just mentioned, as well as summaries of the laws affecting plati-
num, of the several Commercial Standards which now have the
effect of law, and of the Canadian law applying to the marking of
precious metals. Another most useful volume is *Trademarks of
Jewelry and Kindred Trades*, published by the Jewelers' Circular-

Keystone, 100 East 42nd Street, New York. This book illustrates
several hundred trademarks, and in addition summarizes the
stamping laws and explains their application.

The manner in which the various silver alloys may be stamped
has already been discussed in this book—see Chapter II.

"TOLERANCE"

Our lawmakers have assumed that jewelers and silversmiths are
subject to human error, so they allow a "tolerance" between the
quality indicated by the stamp and the actual quality as deter-
mined by an assay. The law also allows for solder, and requires
that the article, solder and all, must approach within a certain
percentage of the stamp. Thus the law of June 13, 1906, as sum-
marized in the *Handy Book*, provides that:

"If an article is made of gold and is stamped gold, it must also bear a
quality mark such as '10 karat' (10-K), '14 karat' (14-K).
"If an article of gold is given a quality mark, the fineness by assay must
not be lower than:"
Watch Cases and Flatware .003 less than stamped quality. Other articles, not including solder .0208 (1/2 karat) less than the stamped quality.

"However, the assay of a complete article, including solder, must not be more than .0417 (1 karat) under the stamped fineness per karat.

"For example, the gold in a 14-karat watch case, free from solder, must be at least .5803 by assay. The entire case, including solder, must assay at least .547 (13 karat). A gold ring, not soldered, stamped '14-K' must assay at least .5625 (13 1/2 karat). The gold in a brooch stamped '10-K' must assay at least .3958 (1/2 karat) and the entire brooch, solder and all, must assay at least .3750 (9 karat).

"The silver in any article stamped 'Sterling Silver' should assay .925, and the silver in an article marked 'Coin Silver' should assay .900. The silver in an article, not including solder, must not be less than this by more than .004. For example, an article marked 'Sterling Silver,' free from solder, must assay at least .921.

"Soldered parts must not reduce the assay of the entire article, including solder, by more than .010 under the standard assays of .925 and .900, respectively, for sterling silver and coin silver. For example, an article marked sterling silver when melted, including solder, must assay at least .935.

Most manufacturers make their goods as close to the limit of tolerance as they dare. Many of them, either wittingly or unwittingly, go below this tolerance. The buyer must keep this possibility in mind when he is calculating the value of a precious metal article.

LAWS FOR STAMPING PLATINUM

For some years after the introduction of platinum as a jewelry metal there was confusion regarding its marking, and much misbranding, adulteration and fraud took place. Three of the States in which considerable platinum jewelry was manufactured—New Jersey, New York, and Illinois—passed laws regulating the stamping of platinum and its alloys. And finally, on June 20, 1938, the National Bureau of Standards made effective a series of regulations, based on these State laws, that cover the entire nation. The full text of the New York State law will be found in the Handy Book. Copies of the new National Standard, known as Commercial Standard 66-38, may be obtained from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C, for 5c. Briefly its main provisions are as follows:
Articles may be stamped "platinum" or "plat," provided all parts of the article purported to be of platinum shall constitute at least 985/1000 parts platinum. If platinum assaying 985/1000 parts pure has been combined with gold the article must be stamped with the karat mark indicating the fineness of the gold in conjunction with the word or abbreviation of platinum, as "14K & Plat." When platinum is alloyed with iridium, palladium, ruthenium or osmium, these articles must be marked in fractions designating the content of these metals. Merchandise bearing quality marks must also be stamped with a registered trade mark.

Since the rules regarding the stamping of platinum alloys are new, a great deal of platinum jewelry now in use was made before these controls were drafted. Accordingly some of the marks on platinum jewelry are misleading now. For years palladium was more expensive than platinum; therefore it was accepted practice to use palladium with platinum, without mentioning the fact. Later the price of palladium fell below that of platinum, and a metal that had once enhanced the value of an article became a cheapener. This situation is only one of the reasons why the purchaser should test platinum articles with extra care.

OTHER COMMERCIAL STANDARDS

The National Bureau of Standards, in co-operation with the precious metal industries, has formulated several other "Commercial Standards" that may be of interest. These Standards have their origin in the Bureau, rather than in the legislative halls, and are a crystallization of trade practices. They are subject to amendment when an interested industry feels that changes are advisable, and they are enforced by the Federal Trade Commission. Copies may be obtained from the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C, at five cents each. Other standards may possibly be adopted in the future. The following are now effective:

Marking articles made of silver in combination with gold—Commercial Standard 51-35.
Marking articles made of karat gold—CS 67-38.
Marking of gold filled and rolled gold plate articles other than watchcases—CS 47-34, with amendments of February 25, 1939. Bu-
letin TS-1942, of July, 1933, defines the terms "Gold filled" and "Rolled gold plate."

Marking of jewelry and novelties of silver—CS 118-44.

ENFORCEMENT

While the marking of precious metals has, as we see, been subject to law for centuries, obedience to these laws is not yet perfect. But the fight for honesty in marking and in advertising is being carried on actively by a number of organizations, some of them maintained directly by the precious metal industries. The reader who finds instances of fraud or misrepresentation would report them at once to the Better Business Bureau of his city; or, he or his jeweler should communicate with the Jewelers Vigilance Committee, Inc., New York 19, N. Y. These groups, in co-operation with the Federal Trade Commission and the National Bureau of Standards, have accomplished much, not only in the enforcement of penal laws, but also in obtaining official condemnation of various borderline cases. Also the American Gem Society of Los Angeles, through its members, has done a great deal toward clarifying the advertising and labeling of diamonds and other gem stones.

STANDARDS IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

Each nation has its own standards, not only for the alloys used in coinage, but also for silverware and jewelry. In Chapter II we observed that the word "silver" on a piece of jewelry does not mean the same thing in all lands. To give the details of all these varying standards would not be profitable here, inasmuch as the buyer rarely is sure of the origin of the old metal he buys. The wise practice is to confirm all stamps by one or another of the methods described in these chapters.

"LET THE BUYER BEWARE!"

If every article made of precious metal was truthfully stamped, there would be little need for a book like this. But many articles are never marked at all—dentures and chemical ware, for example. And the antiquarian handles articles made before the present laws were framed. An article can be truthfully marked when made,
then, perhaps because its thin outer layer is worn off, or because some repair job added considerable solder or even an additional part of a different composition, the old mark may have become misleading. Finally there is always the possibility of fraud. Thus it is clear that the buyer of old precious metals must indeed be wary. One well-known buyer says, "Never believe a karat mark unless it is accompanied by a reputable trademark, and sometimes not even then." If there is no trademark, the stamp may well be quite meaningless.

Chains and mesh are probably the worst offenders. It is recognized that considerable solder is needed in making some kinds of chains, and the wise buyer will assume that even more than that is present. Links that test say 12-k on the stone, when melted down and assayed may turn out to be 10-k or less; chains that test 10-k on the stone may assay 8-k. And so on.

SOME PRECAUTIONS

If an article consists of more than one part, like the old-fashioned watchcase with front, back, bezel and bow, test each piece separately, as those less exposed may be of lower value. Lockets and big cuff links sometimes are reinforced by a base-metal disk inside. Examine the pin and safety catch on brooches. Do not hesitate to file deep notches, maybe two or three, on different surfaces of each piece. Remember that an old article may have been repaired, with the addition of much solder or even a new low-karat segment.

Articles such as candlesticks are often made of a hollow metal shell which is filled or loaded, sometimes with pitch, sometimes
with lead which has been melted and poured in. Sometimes the base alone is loaded. This same scheme has been used with heavy link bracelets, etc., and has occasionally deceived the inexperienced observer.

Rolled or filled gold requires special care. It consists largely of base metal such as brass, with a thin layer of karat gold on the outside. Usually this outer layer is 10-k or 12-k. You may find a stamp reading "1/10 12-k." Analyze this stamp and you will realize that this article when new assayed only one-twentieth fine gold, as the 12-karat alloy is only half fine gold, and the karat gold shell is only one tenth of the total weight of the article. After years of usage the outer gold layer, originally very thin, may be worn down to almost nothing. Therefore, when estimating its value, "let the buyer beware." Some professional gold buyers refuse to handle this material.

ANTiques

Very old gold jewelry is sometimes worth more than you would think. Years ago when platinum was cheaper than gold, it was sometimes used as an alloy. It cheapened and stiffened the gold, without increasing its tendency to tarnish, and in rare cases was used in sufficient amount to increase the value of the article. On the other hand, much old jewelry is dishonestly marked, and sometimes you will find that an antique with a handsome exterior is nothing but soft solder inside.

Fraud

Deliberate fraud occurs too often to be ignored. The Jewelers' Circular-Keystone, in its issue of September, 1943, reports one instance. A customer complained that a certain ring, stamped and sold as 14-k gold, blackened his finger. The retailer tested it hastily (by rubbing an edge on the stone and testing the streak) and it seemed to be a full 14-k. But further examination disclosed that about nine tenths of the ring was silver, lightly gilded. Thin circles of 14-k gold wire had been soldered to the top and bottom edges of a heavy silver ring, so that if a touchstone test were made in haste, only gold would rub off. The moral of this is: file
a deep notch if possible, and test more than one surface. Incidentally, the buyer might have been warned by the fact that while this ring bore a karat stamp, there was no maker's trademark—always a suspicious circumstance.

A poorly disguised fraud. Circles of thin gold wire were soldered to the edges of a heavy silver ring, and the combination was gold-plated. The quality stamp was not accompanied by a trademark. Part of the silver ring and part of one gold circle have been cut away.

DENTAL ALLOYS

Metals that have been used in dentistry carry no stamp, and their purity and suitability depend upon the integrity and knowledge of the dental technician. Much dental gold is of high quality, especially inlays and crowns, but in the construction of a denture it is often necessary to use considerable solder, which may be 16-k, 14-k, or even lower. Parts of metal that are covered by vulcanite or porcelain may be of low grade gold or even of base metal, and sometimes rivets of copper or silver are used, then covered over with gold solder.

Old fashioned false teeth were, in many cases, provided with two small pins of high-grade iridio-platinum. Much of the work done today, while more satisfactory to the patient, may contain no precious metal at all, so each job must be considered individually.

SCIENTIFIC APPARATUS

Enormous amounts of precious metals have been made up into instruments and equipment for the various scientific industries and professions. The laws applying to jewelry apply equally well
to these instruments, and quality stamps and makers’ trademarks should always be looked for. In other chapters we learn that in these fields the precious metals may be alloyed with or combined with each other, or with the base metals, in such a profusion of forms that the beginner may well be discouraged. However, no other field is potentially more profitable to the buyer of metals.

TREASURE HUNTING IS STILL FASCINATING

These paragraphs may have suggested that this business of buying and selling old precious metals may be as interesting as it is profitable. To find value in a piece of unattractive, unwanted metal brings a thrill of satisfaction over and above the mere gratification of the profit motive. To solve the question of its worth may be as full of unexpected twists as any other puzzle. For instance, we once had occasion to buy a heavy old-fashioned watch-chain. Its appraisal seemed to be as simple a task as could be found. We exposed the metal to the oxygen flame; all the links glowed, but three of them glowed with a difference. On closer examination we found that those three links were silver—carved exactly like the others—apparently the result of some old repair job, long since forgotten. On another occasion one section of a discarded penholder, when scraped clean of encrusted ink, turned out to be 18k gold. . . . Incidents like these help to make this work a constant adventure.