

## GEMLURE

# Opal: Smolder of Fortune?

By CHERI LESH

Gemological Institute of America  
Santa Monica, California

*"... 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, shot out a brilliant spark like a falling star, and became the instant afterwards lightless and colourless as a common pebble, while the beautiful Baroness sunk on the floor of the chapel with a deep sigh of pain. All crowded around her in dismay. The unfortunate Hermione was raised from the ground, and conveyed to her chamber; and so much did her countenance and pulse alter, within the short time necessary to do this, that those who looked upon her pronounced her a dying woman."<sup>1</sup>*

It seems hard to believe that the fantastic passage quoted above could

cast a shadow of suspicion over the opal's sparkling fires. Yet this unwarranted reputation as a gem of ill-luck has dogged the opal for more than a century, and the myth seems to have derived largely from Sir Walter Scott's novel, *Anne of Geierstein: or The Maiden of the Mist*, published in 1831. In this book, the mysterious damsel Hermione, "a doctor of theology in the dress of an Eastern dancing girl,"<sup>2</sup> appears before the Baron of Arnheim under extraordinary circumstances. Scott describes this apparition in minute detail, paying particular attention to her headdress; "she wore no turban or headdress of any kind, saving a blue riband drawn through her auburn hair, and secured by a gold clasp, the outer side of which was ornamented by a superb opal, which, amid the changing lights peculiar to that gem,

<sup>1</sup>Scott, Sir Walter, *Anne of Geierstein: or The Maiden of the Mist*, Boston, Bazon & Ellsworth, 1831.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

displayed internally a slight tinge of red like a spark of fire.”<sup>3</sup>

However, in context, it is quite obvious that this opal is no ordinary opal, just as Hermione is no ordinary Persian woman. This is a tale of bewitchment, and Hermione's opal, which glowed with its own rather than with reflected light, bears no more relation to actual opals than a unicorn does to a Shetland pony.

Some believe that Scott modeled the opal in *Anne of Geierstein* after a magnificent, large opal which Napoleon presented to Josephine. The play of color in this jewel was so intense that Napoleon called it, “The Burning of Troy.” Perhaps Scott did deliberately make an evocative analog to that gem, playing on the British dislike of anything French — particularly anything related to a French Emperor who had sworn to master the world!

Regardless of Sir Walter's feelings toward the French, there is no evidence to suggest that he meant to slander opals. While Sir Walter Scott was, in the style of his day, a bit didactically moral, he had a great love of beauty. He would not have wanted to impugn such a beautiful stone as the opal, and such was certainly not his intent. Writers deal in metaphor the way jewelers deal in actual gems; it is their livelihood. Only a very literal reading of *Anne of Geierstein* could produce an aversion to opals. Scott wanted a talisman which would symbolize the inner fires and changeable passions of his elfish and elemental anti-heroine.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Since mood rings had not yet been invented, his artistic quest for an appropriate symbol fell upon the opal. It was a logical choice; several varieties of opals are indigenous to Scotland, so it was undoubtedly a stone he was familiar with. However, the occult image conjured by the Baroness Hermione and her ever-changeable gem were supposed to be due to a peculiar circumstance of enchantment, not to any inherent quality of the opal itself.

Once this superstition regarding opals has been demystified and explained, few consumers will retain any uneasy feeling towards them. The tradition which honors the beauty and good fortune of opals encompasses at least 3,000 years and many different cultures. The Aztecs and Incas introduced their variety of opal to the Spaniards, who noted that the peoples of these ancient civilizations held the opal in higher regard than any other gem except for jade. In Indonesia, opal is known as “The Royal Gem of Java” and also as “The Queen” and is considered a sign of royal blood. The ancient Greeks and Romans revered the opal above all other gems except the emerald. According to Orpheus: “On Olympus the opal was the delight of the Immortals, so fair to view that it charmed the strong eye and strengthened the weak.”<sup>4</sup> The Greeks held the opal to be sacred to Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, and the Romans also valued it as the

<sup>4</sup>Leechman, Frank, *The Opal Book*, Sydney, Australia, Ure Smith, 1961.

badge of Venus and her cherubic child Cupid.

It is true that the opal presents an irresistible allure as a lover's token. It has already been mentioned that Napoleon chose an opal as a bond of affection between himself and his Empress Josephine, and he considered that stone so inherently romantic that he nicknamed it "The Burning of Troy," evoking memories of Helen and Paris, those star-crossed lovers of the past. History tells us that Mark Anthony coveted a ring belonging to Senator Nonius, which contained an opal the size of a hazelnut. Mark Anthony wanted the ring to give to Cleopatra, as a token of his ardent passion. When Nonius refused to sell him the ring, Anthony flew into a rage, and retaliated by ordering Nonius' death and the confiscation of all his property. Nonius had to flee from Rome so abruptly that he could take only the clothes he wore — and the opal he valued so highly. Nonius apparently lived happily ever after in exile, while Mark Anthony met defeat on the sands of Egypt to the forces of Octavian. Various historians have confirmed their culture's belief in the luck and virtue of these gems. Pliny, who related the story of Nonius, called opal a gem of incomparable beauty and elegance. B. de Boodt (1647) acknowledged it as the most beautiful of gems, and Dutens (1779) shared that opinion and said that in his time, opals were valued as high as diamonds. Ure (1853) confirmed this evaluation, saying, "In modern times fine opals of moderate bulk have

been frequently sold at the price of diamonds of equal size: the Turks being particularly fond of them."<sup>5</sup>

The mass hysteria accompanying the Black Plague in Europe caused the opal to fall into temporary disrepute. Many in the Middle Ages sought to appease an angry God by destroying all the "devil's vanities" such as statues, pictures, jewels, fine clothing, anything they possessed of artistic and aesthetic value. The 'bad luck' of the opal, then, was simply linked to the fact that it was an object of great beauty! Since theology of the time dictated that the glories of the earth were a snare and a delusion, Satan's web spun to trap unwary mortals, a gem of incomparable beauty like the opal attracted much suspicion. To the medieval mind, the world was a horrific place populated by unseen demons and strange hosts of evil: demonic possession was nine-tenths of the lawless. Even the Victorians shared the medieval distrust of earthly pleasure. The faddish superstition which arose in connection with the publication of *Anne of Geierstein* was probably the result of a prudish Victorian sensibility which eyed the sensual glories of the world with doubtful qualms. Queen Victoria herself considered the opal's inner fires an aesthetic virtue, devoid of more sulphurous connotations. She stoutly defended the opal's reputation, and instituted a royal custom of giving the sparkling gems to her daughters on the

<sup>5</sup>Ure, *Dictionary of Arts, Manufacturing and Mines*, New York, 1853.



occasion of each of their marriages in an attempt to allay the public's empty fears.

For those souls brave and rational who dismiss the whisperings of the timid, the rewards of opal are many. For those who want a gem which is as individualistic as they are, opal is ideal. Opal comes in many varieties, enough to suit every personality and preference. There is the pin fire, a needlepoint rainbow; the harlequin opal with its jester's patchwork of color; the flash opal with its moving bands of light; the abanderado opal with its ribbons of fire. From Mexico, there is the unique water opal which they term "illusivisnando" which is as transparent as a raindrop but with the full spectrum of the rainbow glinting within like a crystallized tear of the sun.

The basic body hue of opals also covers the full range of the rainbow, from the milk opal with its creamy white background to the mysterious black opal which sometimes shimmers with rare tints of indigo and violet. Orange, peach, salmon, honey, cherry, beige, turquoise, peacock or cloudy blue, the opal shows a thousand faces, with plays of color ranging from volcanic fires to the northern lights. Whatever the customer's desire, an opal can be found which will suit almost any requirements for shade or style.

The opal is a stone of incomparable warmth and loveliness, rife with lover's symbolism. The diamond's chaste white flame may be forever, but the pulsing hearthfires of the opal speak more eloquently of passion. It

is an ideal love token for trysts and engagements.

Another favorable aspect of opals is that each one is unique. A handful of one-carat diamonds may each have a distinctive 'fingerprint' revealed by a gemprint machine, or may be distinguished by a trained gemologist with a microscope, but they are dazzlingly alike to the prospective buyer. The opal's individuality can be easily detected by the layperson wanting a distinctive gem, and this uniqueness makes it even more valuable. It is a substance ancient beyond human lore; opal was 60 million years old before humans made the first arrowhead. Fossilized shells and bones of prehistoric animals have been found entirely replaced by the silica gel known as opal.

The ancient earth processes which create opal are unique to that stone; no other gem is like it. It is a child of the volcano, whose Goddess, Pele, is known as "the fire in the night." It is a fortuitous composition of the four elements of earth, fire, water and light. Formed by deep fires in the earth, it owes its brilliant reflection of the light to the water trapped by an intricate lattice of silica within. The "fire" of the opal is created by Nature's brush alone, not the faceting skill of a patient human hand. The 'only Nature can make an opal' factor may appeal to those involved in the back to nature movement.

Of course there are those who claim that opals are unlucky because they are fragile. Well, so are butterfly wings and soap bubbles. Iridescence

in nature is a transient phenomenon. Rainbows, halos around the moon, and the sunset playing over the sea are fleeting. Opal is the most durable form of shimmer and shine in Nature's jewelbox. The Aztecs called opal "vitzitziltecpatl," "the hummingbird-stone." The pleasures of owning a ruby-throated rainbow cannot be measured in days and years alone. The fragility of modern opal is greatly overestimated. Even the vibrant but delicate Virgin Valley opals of Nevada can now be stabilized by a process formulated by Bill Kelly in 1962. The process contains no foreign additives and does not alter the physical or chemical properties of opal. There are several different techniques for preserving opals from losing their moisture and cracking or crazing. Fine gem quality opals from every source are now generally well-regulated to ensure their long-lasting qualities. There are opals in European museums whose fire has remained undiminished over periods of hundreds of years. So there is no longer any reason for the exaggerated fear of opal's impermanence to tarnish the name of this lovely stone.

Speaking of opal's "good name," an examination of the word's origin reveals still further the veneration in which this stone was held, as far back as the dawn of language. It has often been said that the opal derives its name from the Sanskrit, "Upala," meaning "Precious Gem." In Greek this became "Opallus," which became transformed to "opal" in modern day English. While there is

no disputing opal's designation as a "precious gem," Barrie O'Leary states that this derivation is incorrect. He traces the term opal to two ancient Greek words, one of which is the root for such words as "optical," "opaque" and "optometrist" and means "to see." The other Greek root word gives us "alter" and "alias" and translates as "to change." Thus opal literally means, "to see change." Curiously, the word "Witch" also derives from a term meaning "the bender or changer." Magic has long been known as the art of change, so it would seem that the potential mystical properties of the opal were discovered early on. Coincidentally enough, the Indonesian word for opal is "Kalimaya." Kali means "river," and also the Goddess of birth, death and transition. Maya means "illusion." So for the Indonesians, the opal was "a river of illusion," with "the Goddess of illusion" as another possible interpretation. Opal is also known as "The Queen" and has a long association with royalty.

The persistent beliefs that opal is a harbinger of fortune, good or bad, probably stem from the deep effect viewing the stone can have on the human spirit. The flickering fires which shift and change like the Northern lights under the opal's glossy skin are profoundly moving. They thrill the senses and titillate the soul. The early Australian Aborigines held them in awe, believing that the glistening, mysterious glows within were evil spirits beckoning and enticing them with their beauty.

However, it is a cross-cultural trait among aboriginal peoples to hold the powers of the world in a reverence approaching dread, and to refuse to touch them, believing that only a Shaman, a tribal mystic leader, could harness those powers and shape them to his/her purpose. Now that we no longer fear such earthly spirits, the fact that the opal's lights seem so alive as to possess their own soul can be seen as a tribute to their powerful beauty.

In a modern psychological context, how one feels about opals may well reflect how comfortable one is with one's own inner fires and mysteries. An uneasiness with the hidden, arcane side of human personality may translate into a fear of the gem which causes those dark currents to stir and flutter within. People at peace with their spirituality can relax and appreciate the glory of opal. As an old Australian opal miner once put it, "The only unlucky thing about opals is not having any."

#### Bibliography

##### Books:

Leechman, Frank, *The Opal Book*,

Sydney, Australia, Ure Smith, 1961.

Perry, Nance and Ron, *Australian Opals in Colour*, Tokyo, Japan, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969.

Scott, Sir Walter, *Anne of Geierstein: or The Maiden of the Mist*, Boston, Bazon & Ellsworth, 1831.

##### Magazine Articles:

Bower, Carol E., "Digging for Black Opals at the Royal Peacock Opal Mines, Virgin Valley, Nevada," *Lapidary Journal*, May 1977, p. 526-533.

Gardiner, Thomas H. and Gloria, "Buried Treasure of Coober Pedy," *The Australian Lapidary Magazine*, March 1977, p. 3-10.

O'Leary, Barrie, "Fire Forever," *Lapidary Journal*, October 1977, p. 1498-1510.

O'Leary, Barrie, "Opals of Indonesia," *Lapidary Journal*, February 1977, p. 2484, 2498-2500.

Parsons, Charles J., "Practical Gem Knowledge for the Amateur," Part thirty-eight, *Lapidary Journal*, March 1968, p. 1468-1478.

Spreen, George H., "A Solidified Rainbow — Mexican Opal," *Gems and Minerals*, October 1977, p. 30-31.

Zeitner, June Culp, "The Opal of Queretaro," *Lapidary Journal*, July 1979, p. 868-880.