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Those among us who are sufficiently in the sunshine of fortune to possess golden luxuries—whether in the form of plates or dish-covers, candlesticks or candelabra, racing-cups or presentation plates, watch-cases or watch-chains, ear rings or finger-rings—are not fully aware of the solicitude with which Her Majesty's Parliament supervises the gold; to see that it is of the right quality; to see—not, perhaps, that all that glitters shall be gold—but that all which is called gold shall have some sort of claim to that designation.

It is of old standing, this supervising authority over the goldsmiths. So long back as the reign of Edward the First, an Act was passed to settle this matter: to determine which, between two kinds of jewellery, shall be deemed the real Simon Pure. No article of gold or silver was to be made with a baser alloy than those named in the Act; and none should pass into the market until its quality had been assayed, and a leopard's head stamped upon it. The Wardens of the Goldsmith's Company were empowered to go from shop to shop among the goldsmiths, to ascertain that the gold employed was of the right "touch," or alloy. Then, Henry the Sixth's Parliament enacted, among things relating to silver, that all silver articles should be at least as fine as "sterling;" that every workman or maker should stamp his mark on every article; and that every maker's private mark should be made known to the Goldsmiths' Company. Several early charters gave to this powerful

Company a general control over the gold and silver trade; the wardens were constituted judges of the standards of the precious metals; and they were empowered to search out and destroy all specimens of "deceitful work"—that is, work made of gold or silver below the standard. It was towards the close of the fifteenth century that they were entrusted with the privilege of stamping manufactured goods. In the time of Elizabeth a statute declared the well-known "twenty-two carats" to be the standard quality which all gold manufacturers must reach; that is, an alloy of twenty-two parts of gold to two of silver; while the standard for silver was to be eleven ounces two pennyweights of fine silver in twelve ounces, the rest being copper. The wardens had no bed of roses, it would seem; for an Act passed in 1665 recited, "that the wardens of the said Company, in punishing defaults in the said trade, had been at great charges, and at the peril of their bodies as well as at the loss of their goods; so that the wardens then, on account of the menaces and assaults from the workers, could not put into execution the authority given to them by former charters." The Kings, and Queens, and Parliaments laboured hard to ensure the goodness of the precious wares; for in 1738 a new statute strengthened the provisions of all the old ones, especially as to the standards for gold and silver. There was, however, an exemption in favour of jewellers using gold in certain of the trinkets made by them: the gold might in such cases be lower than the standard. All the goods, when found to be of the proper standard, were to be stamped with the initials of the worker, the arms of the Company, and a distinct variable letter to denote the year; but in mercy to the fragile structure of the tender family of pencil-cases, tweezer-cases, necklace beads, rings, buttons, thimbles, filagrée work, toothpicks, chains, and such-like—they were exempted from the rude visitations of the stamping process.

The Government made use of the Company as a means of insuring the payment of a duty imposed (in 1719) on plate; this duty was sixpence per ounce. The Company kept a sharp eye on the makers, and the Excise on the Company; and assay-papers and receipts were planned with all due formality. The Company were of course not expected to do their work for nothing; they were to receive tenpence for assaying and stamping a gold watch-case, fivepence for a gold buckle, fifteenpence for a gold snuff-box, half-a-crown for any piece of gold plate under thirty ounces, and so on. There is a curious use of the word *diet* in the Act just named; it being enacted that, from every piece of silver plate, weighing above four pounds troy sent to be assayed and stamped, the wardens are empowered to take out or detain a diet not exceeding ten grains per pound.

Thus did Parliament reign after reign, throw its protective shield over these luxuries.—The Goldsmiths' Company had at first control over all the kingdom; but similar guilds were afterwards established at Exeter, Bristol, Newcastle, and a few other towns. About the year 1773, the towns of Birmingham and Sheffield, having become somewhat conspicuous for their works in gold and silver, and feeling the annoyance attending the sending of their wares for assay and stamping to distant towns, obtained powers to establish companies under the title of "Guardians of the standard of wrought plate." These bodies were to choose wardens, assayers, and other officers; and we now learn what is the meaning of the *diet* of those towns. The assayer for each town, (Birmingham for instance,) is empowered to scrape eight grains from every troy pound of the silver plate or other article sent to the Company's office to be assayed and stamped; this he equally divides into two little parcels, one of which is immediately locked up in the *assayer's box*, while the other is operated upon. After the assay, the article is broken in pieces if below the proper standard, and the owner has to pay sixpence per ounce for the assay; but if it be standard as above, the article is stamped, and a fee paid according to a certain graduated scale. If the four grains per pound be more than enough for the assay, the overplus goes as a perquisite to the Company. But now for the assayer's box and its contents. If the standard of each piece of plate be right and proper, the remaining little parcel of four grains per pound is taken out of the assayer's box, and with due formality deposited in a more honored receptacle called the *diet-box*. By the end of a year, this box contains diets or samples of all the plate found by assay during the year to be proper in standard. Once a year, the officers of the Company send up this box to the Mint in London; where the Assay-master tries the little bits or diets, in order to see that the Birmingham assayer has not departed from the true standard: if he has, his pocket is made to suffer.

These Birmingham and Sheffield guilds, like those of London, York, Exeter, Bristol, Chester, Norwich, and Newcastle, were made a kind of cat's-paw for the Government, in respect to an increased duty of 8s. per ounce on gold manufactures and 6d. per ounce on those of silver, imposed in 1784. The wardens, after assaying and stamping, were to receive the duty before returning the articles; the Excise demanded it of them whether they had received it or not; so we may be pretty sure that the wardens of the respective Companies did not let the owners escape scot-free. The owners paid the duty to the Companies; the Companies handed it over to the Excise; and the Excise gave them 6d. in the pound for their trouble.

As there is no good reason why all the world

should agree about these standards of purity, it is no wonder that manufacturers should have occasionally tried to obtain some variation. The legislature settled this question, in 1798, by allowing two standards for manufactured gold, one of "twenty-two carats," and the other of "eighteen carats;" the same Companies were to assay and stamp both kinds; and the same stamps were to be employed all excepting the "lion passant," which royal animal was to be exclusively appropriated to the finer kind of gold. So recently as 1844 these little peddlings with industry (for such they are apt to appear in these our free-trade days) were further modified. It had been found that, by stamping gold and silver with the same dies, a little hocus-pocus might possibly enable a dishonest person to pass off a silver gilt article for gold; it was therefore enacted that all the gold articles of "twenty-two carats fine" should be stamped with the mark of a Crown and the figures 12.

All these curious statutes, with a few curious exceptions, are still in force; and form a body of industrial law which is more likely to diminish than increase in future. The great City Companies have in many cases outlived their duties, though by no means outlived their wealth; but the Goldsmiths' Company has still both duties and wealth. The following is pretty nearly the relation, at the present day, between the four parties interested in gold and silver manufactures—the Crown, the Goldsmiths' Company, and the manufacturers, and the public.

Every article made in or near London, of gold and silver, except certain trinkets and small wares, must be sent to the Goldsmiths' Hall near Cheapside. The maker must previously stamp his mark upon it, which mark must be known and approved by the Company. It is assayed at the Hall; it is broken up and returned if below the proper standard, but stamped and returned if of due quality. The Company employ persons to scrape a few fragments from every article, for the purpose of assay; and these persons, to ensure their thorough knowledge, must have served a seven years' apprenticeship to a goldsmith. There being many gold and silversmiths, and manufacturers of watch-cases and chains, living in and near Clerkenwell, the Goldsmiths' Company, when they rebuilt their Hall some years ago, determined to build it on its present central site, rather than remove it nearer to the Mint. There is a constant running to and fro between the workshops and the Hall; and many losses might occur if the Hall were too far distant. Clerkenwell and Foster Lane are the two poles of an electric chain, having links of silver and gold—a figure, by the way, which we fear is not quite faultless; for these two metals, though electric in a moral sense, are not much so according to lecture-room philosophy.

When the wardens and assayers of the Company are examining the articles sent to them, they have power to reject any in which, according to their judgment, there may have been too much solder employed; because solder being less valuable than the metal soldered, the standard of the whole bulk may perchance be reduced too much. The duties of the Company, therefore, may be said to be four-fold in respect to the principal articles of gold and silver sent to them—viz., to see that the gold or silver is of the proper standard; to see that the silver is not plated silver, or the gold silver-gilt; to see that the solder employed has not been too much in relative weight; to stamp the article when approved; and to receive money when the article is returned to the owner. This money consists of a small sum for the stamping-fee, and a much larger sum for the Government. The present duty—seventeen shillings per ounce for gold, and one shilling and sixpence for silver—is practically reduced to fourteen shillings and twopence, and one shilling and threepence, an allowance of one-sixth being made to the manufacturer for a slight reduction in the weight of each article during the finishing processes; this finishing being always conducted after the assaying and stamping have taken place. The Company pay these duties into the Bank of England, where they are placed to the account of the Receiver of Stamps and Taxes; and the Company, having thus acted as tax-gatherers, are paid for so doing, at the rate of two-and-a-half per cent. The Company receives about four thousand a year from the manufacturers for assaying and stamping, and about two thousand a year from the Government for collecting the tax. There is one deputy-warden appointed by the Company, with a salary, to superintend especially these matters; and under him are an engraver of punches, three assayers, two weighers, three drawers, and a cupel-maker.

Boys carry the articles of plate between Clerkenwell and Foster Lane. Let us suppose that young Tom Simmons, a Clerkenwell apprentice, arrived or arriving at years of discretion sufficiently to be trusted, takes a piece of unfinished plate to Goldsmith's Hall. The weighers ascertain the weight, calculate the duty at so much per ounce, set down the fee required for assaying and stamping, and enter the items in due form. The drawers or scrapers then take the piece of plate in hand. They examine it to see that the several parts all belong properly to each other, and that it is not charged with a suspiciously large amount of solder. This examination being satisfactorily concluded, they draw or scrape a few fragments from the surface of the article, just sufficient for the purposes of assay; and if there be a shadow of suspicion that there are different qualities of metal in different parts of the article, the scraper is applied to all

those parts, and a fair average made of the whole. Then comes the third stage in the history: the drawers hand over the little fragments to the assayers, who proceed to determine whether the metal be up to the standard. If all be right up to this time, the drawers again take the piece of plate, and stamp it with the requisite marks. If all be not right, if the metal be lower than the standard, the article is retained until the following day; it is again tried, and if again found wanting, it is broken up; but if the manufacturer, willing to save his poor bantling, should ask for a third trial, and should be willing to pay another shilling for it, he can do so: the third verdict is final, there being no appeal against it; and the broken piece of glitter is sent home in disgrace. But *our* piece of plate we of course assume to be standard. After the assayers have reported well of it, and the drawers have stamped it, the weighers re-weigh it; and then there is very little else to be done before Tom takes home the piece of plate to his master's.

The principle of adulteration (pity that we should have to use such a term) sometimes creeps into these golden products. The maker of a watch-case may, if he be less honest than his compeers, make some of the tiny bits of less than perfect metal; but the drawers baffle him; they scrape from all the parts, good and bad; and if there happen to be former peccadillos attached to his name, the scrapings are made yet more carefully; and he must abide by the average result of the whole. The assayers are not allowed to know to whom the several little packets of scrapings belong; these are wrapped up separately by the drawers, with certain private marks and numbers, and are placed in boxes; and the assayers take them from the boxes, assay them, and report the results, without knowing who are the parties affected by their decision. Thus are there one or two hundred assays, more or less, made every day at the Hall: one assayer confining his attention to gold, and two others to silver

The Company, in order to have some test that their servants have properly performed the duties entrusted to them, hold a kind of annual scrutiny—an assay of a more formal nature. Portions of the scrapings resulting from the assays made during the year, amounting possibly to fifty thousand, are kept, sufficient to form a judgment on the whole. The practical members of the Company are convened—leaving out the noble lords and right honourable gentlemen who somehow become members of this as of the other great City Companies—and the parliament, or jury, or judges, or arbitrators, or scrutineers (call them which we may) melt down the scrapings, and make a very careful assay of them; the result of this assay shows whether or not the three assayers have done their year's work well.—But the *diet* of the Birmingham and Sheffield

assay is more official and more imperative ; we must briefly notice it.

The golden doings of Birmingham have undergone very considerable changes within the last few years. Time was when the "toy-shop of Europe" produced immense quantities of gilt toys, which occupied some thousands of hands ; the buckles, the snaps, the clasps, the earrings, the bracelets, the rings, the brooches—as well as other articles which we may designate toys, or trinkets, or sham-jewellery—were thrown upon the market most unsparingly. Such is not now the case ; and many causes have led to the change. Fashion has, in many instances, refused to sanction that which she formerly applauded ; the gold became thinner and thinner upon the toys, until people began to be ashamed to call it gold at all ; the French showed that they could make gilt-toys presenting more graceful designs than our own ; while the designation of "Brummagem goods" became rather humbling to those who decked themselves therewith. Thus the gilt-toy trade has declined in that town ; but others have arisen which place the golden labours of the townsmen on a better footing. The manufacture of good jewellery has increased ; while the rise and spread of the remarkable electro-plating process have given an immense impetus to the employment of the precious metals at Birmingham. How the Birmingham men use their gold and silver, it is not our province here to describe : Suffice it here to speak of the official inspection of the gold and silver work produced.

The diets or small parcels of scrapings, as mentioned in a former page, are sent up to London from Birmingham in the diet-box, and placed in the hands of the Queen's Assay-master. Here they are examined and assayed, and tested with certain gold and silver trial plates made expressly for this purpose. If the quality be below standard, the Birmingham Assay-master is fined ; but if it be equal or superior to standard, a certificate is returned, which is an acquittal for a whole year's labours. A certificate for the Birmingham gold assays takes somewhat the following form : "These are to certify that, having this day duly assayed and tried the gold Diet from Birmingham, of twenty-two carats of fine gold, and two carats of alloy, and also the gold Diet of eighteen carats of fine gold, and six carats of alloy, pursuant to Act of Parliament 5 Geo. 4, sess. 1824, and having made such trials in presence of —, especially appointed by the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury to attend the same ; I find, in comparison with the respective gold trial plates made for that purpose, that the Diet of twenty-two carats fine is —, and the Diet of eighteen carats fine is — the said trial plates, and do therefore report that the said Diets are sufficiently fine, and fully conformable to the true intent and meaning of the Act aforesaid." The

Queen's Assay-master signs this certificate, in which there are blanks left for indicating whether the gold is "equal to" or "superior to" the standards respectively referred to.

Query : If the Government duty were abandoned on the one hand, and the Companies' privileges on the other—if manufacturers and purchasers were allowed to make their own bargains uninfluenced by all this official parade—would it not be better and cheaper in the end that these diets should die away? Are they not relics of the same antiquated system which at one time gave curfew laws, and at another temporary laws? When trades are too young to run alone they are protected; but they are all getting out of leading-strings now-a-days, one by one. Gold and silver working is certainly an old trade; but, (we wish to leave room for correction) it may just possibly not be old enough to be left to itself.—*Household Words.*