Black Pearl, If It's Fake, Turns Green

By MARYLIN BENDER

DURING the last month, New Yorkers have been intrigued by a series of newspaper advertisements that have come to be known as the Black Pearl Mystery.

The origin of the whodunit was a blind item in a society column about the sale of a black pearl and canary diamond necklace to Prince Aly Khan's half-brother, Sadruddin. When the Prince's wife noticed that the pearls were turning color some months after the purchase, her husband returned the necklace to the jeweler, who refunded the sale price. The sum reportedly ran to six figures.

One Fifth Avenue jeweler took an ad in The New York Times to assure its clients that it was not the seller of artificially colored stones. Other Fifth Avenue jewelers—and lately, jewelers from other sections of the city—have run similar ads.

As the plot thickens, it reveals the extent of public ignorance about pearls, particularly the colored variety.

What makes a pearl black?

A 'Bad Liver'

"The most common explanation is that the oyster has a bad liver," remarked Sidney A. Weiss, president of the Imperial Pearl Syndicate, manufacturers and wholesalers of cultured pearl jewelry, "or that underwater volcanic explosions transformed the color." The facts are considerably less picturesque, Mr. Weiss hastened to add.

Pearls are formed when a foreign substance enters the oyster's shell. The oyster reacts to the intrusion with a bile-like secretion, called nacre, that hardens about the substance to form the pearl. Wild or natural pearls are produced by natural causes. They are rare and priced accordingly. Cultured pearls are artificially induced through the insertion of a foreign substance or nucleus in the oyster's shell.

The nacre that the oyster secretes is normally a creamy white color with a pinkish cast. As the oyster opens and closes its shell, and is buffeted about in the water, dirt or other alien matter sometimes becomes mixed with the secretion. As a result, the nacre becomes colored. This color may be the bluish-gray tone that is usually called "black" pearl.

According to Mr. Weiss, the value of a black pearl is affected by the depth of its color. The closer it approaches black, the more expensive it is. However, color value can be overruled by five other qualities. These are: luster, absence of defects, roundness, size (the bigger the better) and how well the pearls in the piece of jewelry are matched. Mr. Weiss names luster as the most important quality.

Turn Green in Time

There are several ways to add color to pearls. These artificial methods are primarily chemical or electronic. The nucleus that is inserted into the oyster's shell can be darkened or the pearl itself can be put through a dyeing process.

This process has the effect of drying out the skin of the pearl, Mr. Weiss points out. Eventually it will flake or crack. After a period of time, black-dyed pearls turn green. And the truth—as in the case of the Black Pearl Mystery—is revealed to the purchaser.

How can the buyer avoid disillusionment? How can he tell at the moment of purchase if his black pearls have been artificially colored?

"Pearls are the blindest of items," admits Mr. Weiss, "and so the trustworthiness of the seller applies here as it does with diamonds and fur—only more so."

Pearls sold by the Imperial Pearl Syndicate carry a guarantee as to satisfactory quality. Mr. Weiss says that he has urged the Federal Trade Commission to oblige jewelers to disclose in their advertising if black pearls have been artificially colored.

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