

1

Golconda



THE SANCY DIAMOND'S STORY, and indeed the history of power and greed behind all large diamonds, begins at the famous Golconda mines in India. These stories are steeped in the mystical folklore and superstition that are the bedrock of the spiritual, economic, political, and social history of gems. The first rumors of Golconda and its huge diamonds trickled westward to Europe through tales of the awestruck Venetian traveler Marco Polo following his visit to several Indian kingdoms in 1292. He wrote in his *Most Noble and Famous Travels* at the time:

I will pass hence unto the countries of India where I Marco Polo dwelt a long time; and although the things which I will declare, seem not to be believed of them that shall hear it, but have it in a certainty and of a truth, for that I saw it all with my own eyes . . . In the mountains of this country there be found find Adamants [diamonds]. And after they have had much rain, the men go to seek them in the streams that run from the mountains, and so they do find the Adamants, which are brought from the mountains in the summer when the days are long. Also there be strong serpents and great, very venomous, seeming that they were set there to keep the Adamants that they might not be taken away, and in no part of the world there is found fine Adamants but there. . . . No country but this grows diamonds. Those which are brought to our part of the world are only the refuse of the finer and larger stones. For the flower of the diamonds and other large gems, as well as the largest pearls, are

all carried to the Great Khan and other kings and princes of those regions [the subcontinent of India]. In truth they possess all the treasures of the world.

By the sixteenth century, as the Portuguese overtook the Venetians in trade with India by virtue of the new sea trade route opened by Vasco da Gama, two Portuguese merchants, Fernao Nuniz and Domingos Paes, reiterated Marco Polo's claim when they reported home that all diamonds weighing more than ten to thirteen carats were destined for the Great Mogul's treasury. They also noted that the local ruler charged a levy on all trade in diamonds—from the mining licenses to individual sales among merchants. A century later, the great French diamond merchant adventurer Jean-Baptiste Tavernier stated, "Trade is freely and faithfully undertaken there. Two percent of every purchase is paid to the King, who also levies fees from the merchants for their mining permits."

Two centuries later, Marco Polo's original observations were again confirmed by another Italian, Niccolo de Conti, who related how all the hill districts were infested with snakes and diamonds. De Conti wrote: "At certain periods of the year men bring oxen and drive them to the top of the hill, and having cut them up in pieces, cast the warm and bleeding fragments upon the summit of the other mountain. The diamonds stick to these fragments. Then come the vultures and eagles which seizing the meat for their food, fly away with it to places where they may be safe from serpents. To these places afterwards come men and collect the diamonds."

But these are not the earliest accounts written about diamonds. At the time when Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.) made his conquest of Asia, the Greeks wrote about a legend of the Valley of the Diamonds that held a fortune of diamonds in plain sight—a fabulous treasure that was guarded by serpents. This story was told and retold over the centuries and formed the basis for the legendary tales of Sinbad the Sailor in the *Arabian Nights*, written by an anonymous author, now described as a pseudo-Aristotle, who explained:

Other than my pupil Alexander, no one has ever reached the valley where the diamonds are found. It lies in the East, along the great border of Khurasan, and it is so deep that a human eye cannot see

to the bottom. When Alexander reached the valley, a multitude of serpents prevented him going farther, for their glance proved mortal to men. So he resorted to the use of mirrors: the serpents were caught by the reflection of their own eyes and so perished. Alexander then adopted another ruse. Sheep were slaughtered, then flayed, and their flesh cast into the depths. Birds of prey from the neighboring mountains swooped down and carried off in their claws the flesh, to which countless diamonds adhered. Alexander's warriors hunted the birds, which dropped their booty, and the men merely had to gather it where it fell.

Over the centuries this fabled tale was frequently recounted by Arab and Persian merchants who adopted several versions of it to help them protect the exceedingly valuable sources of their spice trade; this was a primary motivation behind colonial expansion to India through the Middle Ages.

Diamond sources were jealously guarded, and legends like the Valley of the Diamonds were prolific. Diamond merchants never told anyone where they bought their diamonds, or how else they might have come by them. These merchants risked their lives to ply their trade, as they were easy prey for bandits and pirates while transporting their priceless cargoes. Prior to the commercial establishment of the Portuguese sea routes in 1502, diamond merchants either shipped their Indian gems through the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf into the major Mediterranean or Black Sea ports. The overland route followed an ancient road from southeastern India to the north through Afghanistan. From the city of Taxila (now called Takshasila) the trade route met the Silk Road between China and Persia (modern-day Iran).

Few diamonds trickled out of India to Europe until Roman times, and even then, the majority were small decorative stones. Yet to the Romans, according to Roman writer and philosopher Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23–79), the diamond was “only a speck of a stone, but more precious than gold, known only to kings, and to very few of them.” It seems that the Romans believed in the diamond's mystical properties as ardently as the Indians, and certainly the diamond's purported powers would have been part of the spin used to sell the stones at exceptional prices into Europe. Pliny, who may never have seen a diamond

himself, was the first European to record the stone's usefulness as something other than a gemstone: "When an Adamas is successfully broken, [it is] much sought after by engravers and [is] inserted into iron tools for making hollows in the hardest material without difficulty." The Chinese, however, had by the time of Pliny been using industrial diamonds for centuries; they were commonly used as bits for finishing and polishing jade and for drilling holes into pearls for stringing.

With the fall of the Roman Empire, the usefulness of diamonds waned rapidly, and by the fourteenth century the diamond's popularity and deemed mystical powers rated well behind those of the ruby, red spinels (balas rubies), pearls, and sapphires.

Yet in the East, the diamond remained the king of gemstones, highly valued from prehistory for its economic and social importance as well as for its mystical powers. The *Artha Shastra* (The Science of Profit), written in ancient Sanskrit by Kautilya in the fourth century B.C., was concerned with details of the economic, political, and legal system of India. In the chapter "The Examination of Precious Articles to Be Received in the Treasury," Kautilya described the most valuable diamonds as "big, crystalline, and brilliant." The less valuable diamonds are devoid of angles and are uneven, such as diamond splinters and those of various colors "like cat's eye or the urine or bile of a cow." He also laid out the importance of strict control over the trade of all gemstones.

But the spirituality of the diamond is best captured in the world's earliest printed text written in Sanskrit, the *Diamond Sutra*, the most profound *sutra* in Buddhist teachings. From the Sanskrit, *sutra* literally means the "string upon which jewels are threaded," and the *Diamond Sutra* is the perfection of wisdom, which "cuts like the diamond thunderbolt and is thus able to cut through earthly illusion." Great wisdom, in Buddhist thought, is characterized by its indestructible nature and enduring truth. The diamond, and in particular all large diamonds, were considered to be sacred by the Buddhists.

The word *diamond*, from the Greek *adamas*, means invincible. Gem-quality diamonds were the most highly prized of all precious stones, from the moment they were first discovered, for their rareness, pure color, brilliance, transparency, and apparent indestructibility.

Diamonds were believed to be gems fit for the gods, and only the most privileged and exalted earthly representatives could possess them. This message was transmitted through the lapidaries—or gem texts written by royal merchants and philosophers since recorded time—in Sanskrit, Persian, Chinese, Greek, Latin, and Arabic, in which the diamond was given the most prestigious position among gemstones.

The power that the diamond symbolizes transcends national boundaries and beliefs, like a golden thread running through the fabric of ancient civilizations. Interestingly, the Sanskrit word for diamond is *vajra*, and *vajra* also describes the Hindu goddess Indra's thunderbolt. The Greek god Zeus brandished a thunderbolt that was inspired by the diamond crystal. In one ancient text, the *Agastimata*, written in the sixth century, the text scrutinizes and grades diamonds according to their shape, cut, weight, clarity, sparkle, color, and beauty. Different colors were ascribed to various deities as well as to the social caste that had a right to own them:

[The] Diamond has four colors, corresponding to its castes. The diamond with a velvety sheen, like that of a conch shell, a rock crystal or the moon, is a Brahmin. That which is reddish or colored brown like a monkey, beautiful and pure is called *Kshatriya* [of nobles and warriors]. *Vaisya* [farmers and merchants] has a brilliant, pale yellow color. *Sudra* [servants] shines like a well-polished sword: because of its sparkle, experts have assigned it to the fourth caste. Such are the signs which characterize the castes of a diamond.

Hindu sacred lapidary texts also refer to the diamond, providing not only spiritual but also a commercial argument for diamonds being the most valuable of all gems. These texts establish quality criteria for rough diamonds and ascribe beneficial powers to diamonds; today such texts would be considered a sales pitch. These sacred texts carry rich descriptions of the diamond's power to protect against poison, snakes, sickness, and even sinful behavior. According to one of these, the *Ratnapariksha*, "a king who desires happiness must accumulate and wear jewels that have been thoroughly authenticated. A good jewel is a source of wealth for kings, and a bad one is a source of evil." Flawed diamonds, according to the *Brhatsamhita*, a lapidary text by Varahamihira, attract the risks of loss of family, fortune, and life.

The *Brhatsamhita* states that the purest, flawless gems, blessed with perfect octahedron shapes and bearing certain surface markings, called *lakshana*, were considered to be beneficial. Buddhabhata, a sixth-century lapidary author, believes this to be true as well when he writes, “He who has a pure body, and who carries on his person a diamond that is sharp-pointed, without blemish and entirely flawless, shall daily increase his worth in happiness, prosperity, children, wealth, crops, cows and livestock, to the end of his life.”

The Sancy diamond fits this description perfectly. If one is to believe in the mystical power of the diamond described in this ancient text, the Sancy would become a source of evil for those owners who did not thoroughly authenticate its provenance. For those who came by the diamond honestly, it would have been a *lakshana*, daily increasing the owner’s prosperity and power. This is the basis of the Sancy’s curse, and explains why some of its owners met cruel and bloody endings while others remained wealthy and healthy. While I personally do not believe in curses, this explanation does hold true throughout the Sancy’s history.

The Sancy is a pure white and transparent diamond. Its weight, estimated by gem valuers in the fifteenth century to be 106 carats, and color would have destined it to ownership by the Indian king. It was found in the oldest area of diamond extraction near Golconda, but the date of its cutting is unknown. Somehow it reached Europe in the late fourteenth century, making it the largest white diamond in Christendom for well over two hundred years.

According to the legendary diamond cutter Gabi Tolkowsky, the cut is definitely Indian, a forerunner of the briolette cut. He can tell this simply from the fact that like many old Indian cut stones, the Sancy’s size was more important than its brilliance: there are fewer facets in the old Indian style, rather than more facets, as in newer European cuts. Further, one side is more flat, and the other side convex. In the fifteenth century, the cutter would have cut his hands off if it had been done in any other way. Tolkowsky says the Sancy was “cut long ago, and most likely in India, and most probably by a Venetian cutter and merchant who would have known its value in Europe.”

Tolkowsky explains that it was extremely fortuitous that the Sancy was spared from being smashed with a hammer, as this was the cus-

tom to avoid giving large stones to the Mogul ruler in the fourteenth century. The cutter had a high level of expertise and made it limpid and transparent as water when he cut the Sancy. To retain the weight and size of the stone, Tolkowsky believes that the Venetian cutter polished one side flat and one side as a briolette. The entire process would have been conducted in the greatest secrecy and the stone smuggled out of India, since the large stones became legend rapidly.

The Sancy would have been transported to Venice by the merchant and sold to the wealthiest, most powerful ruler to whom he could gain access. At the end of the fourteenth century, Florence was at war with Milan and Lucca. Venice sided at times with Florence, at times with Milan and Lucca, depending on whose expansionist threat it chose to curb. Precisely when or how the diamond reached the phenomenally rich and powerful John Galeazzo di Visconti, duke of Milan, is shrouded in the fog of history. But when John succeeded in expanding his sphere of influence to France through the marriage of his stunningly beautiful and perspicacious daughter Valentine Visconti to the rake and rogue Louis, duke of Orléans, brother of Charles VI, king of France, he gave her a dowry beyond belief.

Valentine had been accustomed to the Milanese court, which was reputed to be the grandest and most luxurious in Italy. When she arrived in France, she initiated a new era that was different from the poorer French court, coming with jewels beyond compare and art objects of unimaginable value. She also brought with her a dowry in cash of 450,000 Milanese florins (\$218.3 million or £136.4 million today) and sovereignty of the town and province of Asti.

Hidden among Valentine's vast array of jewels was one jewel (item 6195) that is described in her Blois inventory dated 1398 as: "A girdle surrounded with a halo of gold on which are mounted at either side four large balas rubies and in the middle of these is one very large balas ruby above which hangs a clasp with four extremely large pearls and in the middle of these is an exceptionally large diamond, and from this clasp hangs a porcupine and from eight points from the said girdle 88 large white pearls are hanging, and this girdle belt is also embossed in gold and white and red enamel."

This "exceptionally large diamond" is the first reference in Europe to the Sancy diamond.