

The Adventures of the Kohinoor

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 juggernaut

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1

I Have Caught My Hare!

If the maharaja was frightened, he didn't show it. Ten-year-old Duleep Singh looked every inch a king as he stepped into the dazzling Shish Mahal, the throne room of the great Lahore fort. But as the serious-looking men in red coats and plumed hats surrounded him, he gripped the hilt of his jewelled sword tightly to stop his hands from shaking. Words from their strange language floated above his head as he looked around desperately for a familiar face. Perhaps a brief nod from someone to tell him that he was doing the right thing.

But he found himself quite alone. His father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was dead. As were his half-brothers. His mother, Rani Jindan Kaur, had been taken away and locked up in a palace outside the city. The few remaining nobles of the Sikh court watched in grim silence. The red-coated men now smiled and nodded encouragingly as the boy walked to a desk.

29 March 1849. The Treaty of Lahore awaited the signature of the young maharaja. The independent Sikh kingdom of Punjab was being handed over to the East India Company.

This private British trading corporation had recently become very wealthy by helping itself to large chunks of Indian territory. To aid them was an army twice the size of Britain's. They had been eyeing the kingdom of Punjab for many years. But it was only after the death of the powerful Maharaja Ranjit Singh that they had their chance. Power struggles within the royal

family, poisonings, brutal assassinations and finally two fiercely fought wars had led to this point. The young Duleep Singh, isolated from family and without any trusted advisers, gave in to the intense pressure on him. Great swathes of some of the richest lands in India were now signed over to the Company.

And there was something else. Something that those 'red coats' wanted above all else. The single most valuable object not just in Punjab but possibly in the whole of India.

Tucked away somewhere in the pages of the treaty that Duleep Singh was shakily signing were the words 'The gem called the Koh-i-Noor, which was taken away from Shah Shooja ool-Moolk by Maharaja Runjeet Singh, shall be surrendered by the Maharaja of Lahore . . .'

As bugles sounded, the flag of the Sikh Khalsa was lowered and the British colours hoisted above the ramparts of Lahore fort.



An uncertain young Maharaja Duleep Singh signs the Treaty of Lahore

I Have Caught My Hare!

Duleep Singh found himself handing over, along with his vast kingdom, the beautiful armlet he had worn strapped to his arm since he was crowned maharaja as a five-year-old, sitting on the lap of his beloved mother, Rani Jindan. In the centre of this armlet was a huge, glittering, egg-shaped diamond.

The fabled Koh-i-Noor, the Mountain of Light.

Far away, a jubilant Governor General Lord Dalhousie was informed that Duleep Singh had signed the treaty. 'I have caught my hare,' he shouted gleefully. This was not about conquering the great kingdom of Punjab with all its riches. The hare in question was the Koh-i-Noor diamond.

He wrote to a friend, 'The Koh-i-Noor has become . . . a sort of historical emblem of the conquest of India. It has now found its proper resting place.' And where was this proper resting

place? Dalhousie had already hatched a plan to send the diamond across the seas as a gift from himself to Victoria, Queen of England. At the same time, in a more sinister move unknown to anyone else, he had also decided to send the child Duleep Singh as far away from his homeland as possible.

At a stroke, Punjab lost its king and the precious Koh-i-Noor was about to leave the shores of India, never to return.

It wasn't the only big diamond in the world – there were others that compared. It wasn't the most valuable. Not even the most beautiful or most perfect or glittery. What then was it about the Koh-i-Noor that made it the most famous diamond in the world, an object that was the very symbol of India? Why did Lord Dalhousie want it even more than he wanted the kingdom of Punjab?

The Invincible Stone

The word 'diamond' comes from the ancient Greek word *adamas* which may have come from the Arabic *al mas*. They both mean the same thing – 'invincible' or unbeatable.

Diamonds are formed when carbon atoms are arranged in a particular formation. The same atoms, if arranged differently, could form coal or graphite such as you have in your pencil. You could think of them as cousins.

More than 3 billion years ago, these carbon atoms lying more than a hundred kilometres below the earth's surface were subjected to very high heat, up to 1500 degrees centigrade, and extreme pressure, causing them to bond together and form the beautiful crystals of the diamond. These crystals then burst out on to the earth's surface through volcanic eruptions of molten rock from deep in the earth.

To answer these questions, we have to go back centuries in time, tracing a history that

is so full of bloody wars, nasty ruffians, greedy plotters, pillage, looting, murder, torture and general mayhem that you may just forget that it is, in fact, the story of a stone!

Some Fun Facts

Diamonds are the hardest substance on earth and have been used for cutting tools since very ancient times.

The only thing that can scratch a diamond is another diamond.

A diamond *can* burn but you would have to heat it to a temperature of around 700 degrees centigrade.

Diamonds are not forever! Although diamonds can be billions of years old, once they emerge on to the earth's surface and are subjected to the regular pressure and temperatures that we experience, they can become unstable. Very slowly they start turning into graphite. Luckily for all those who have splashed out big bucks on their diamonds, the process is too slow to make any noticeable difference!

I Have Caught My Hare!

Somewhere in outer space, scientists have discovered a diamond as big as our moon! Named Lucy (after the Beatles song 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds'), the star was once as big as our sun. It has been steadily shrinking and because of the compression and extreme heat, the entire core has turned into a diamond! At more than 4000 kilometres in diameter, the diamond is a mind-boggling 10 billion, trillion, trillion carats!

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Ancient Crystals

Millions of years ago, when the earth was slowly forming itself and the subcontinent of India was still a hot, molten mess, underground volcanoes spewed lava or liquid rock from deep within the earth's crust. Layers of this lava spread out in sheets, cooled and solidified to form the Deccan Plateau. Along with this lava, fluid rocks known as kimberlite and lamproite containing natural crystals of diamonds that had formed underground billions of years ago erupted on to the earth's surface. Detached from their host rocks, the diamond crystals were swept along in

great waterbodies. They tossed and tumbled in these rivers for hundreds of years until at last, when the rivers died, they came to rest.

Which is where the ancient Indians discovered them. Indians had been sifting the soft soils of these dried-up riverbeds from as early as 4000 years ago. It was hard work, sieving through acres of gravel in filtering pans to find the tiny crystals. Occasionally someone would get lucky and find something bigger.

But it was worth all the effort. The clear, sparkling crystals were beautiful. They were also very hard, the hardest substance known to humankind. Diamonds became valuable not just as jewellery but also, because they were so hard, for use in drilling, carving and polishing tools. Traders began to ship diamonds from India as early as 2000 BCE when tiny Indian diamonds were being used in polishing and cutting tools in ancient Egypt. They were also

in demand in Rome and China to be set into very exclusive rings. The stones were precious and costly and the merchants made great profits in the diamond trade.

Until the early eighteenth century when diamonds were found in Brazil, all the world's diamonds came from India.

The ancient Indians thought of these smooth, clear crystals that emerged mysteriously from the earth as magical gifts, blessed by the gods and able to grant all sorts of handy assistance. Detailed manuals described the diamond as bringing the wearer great riches, a long life, a plentiful harvest, good wives, children, domestic animals ... the list goes on. In addition to all this, the wearer is protected against snakebites and other poisons and will quite suddenly develop clear, glowing skin. The diamond is so powerful that dangerous creatures such as snakes, tigers and even thieves flee from its sight!

But these manuals also struck a note of caution. Being such powerful stones, diamonds could arouse envy, greed and violence in those who hankered after the gems. To those who obtained them dishonestly or wore them with impure hearts, they could be fatal, they warned.

A diamond could curse as easily as it could bless!

Ill Health and Bad Fortune . . .

The Ratnapariksha or 'Examination of Precious Stones' is an extraordinary fifth-century CE manuscript that explains in detail the qualities of the best kind of diamond.

A colourless octahedron with no blemishes, breaks or cracks. Anything less would bring the wearer ill health or bad fortune.



Krishna persuades Jambavan, the king of the bears, to give back
the stolen Syamantaka gem

Gemstones appeared regularly in Hindu mythology. Krishna was falsely accused of stealing the legendary Syamantaka gem, thought to be a massive diamond that once belonged to the sun god, Surya. He would eventually have to fight with Jambavan, the king of the bears, to regain the lost stone and his reputation. Precious stones featured in Sanskrit plays and poetry where the sound of tinkling jewelled ornaments were often used as the background tone for scenes set in swanky palaces or lush gardens.

But it was not all just myths and stories. Indians had a deep technical knowledge of gemstones and wrote books with useful details like the best kinds of stones, where to find them and how to spot a fake. The famous *Arthashastra*, a book on good administration, thought to have been written by Kautilya, a minister of Chandragupta Maurya sometime in the fourth century BCE, has an entire chapter on how a

kingdom should manage its gems and mines and, particularly, its diamonds.

It seems clear that diamonds were already thought of as special in India over 2300 years ago!

The Arthashastra

The first written account of diamonds is in the ancient Sanskrit text called the *Arthashastra*. The author, Kautilya, writes in remarkable detail about a flourishing trade in diamonds in northern India at this time, urging all supervisors of trade and mines to educate themselves on diamonds. His lessons include how and where diamonds are found (by streams and rivers), what they should look like (clear, smooth, heavy, light-reflecting), their colour (like a cat's eye, the blue-green sirisa flower, cow urine, cow fat), weight (heavy) and hardness (hard enough to scratch vessels with water in them).

He even says that diamonds come from the south and once they reach the kingdom they should never leave.

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Babur's Diamond

