

The Diamond Deal

I arrived at the Rangoon airport with a soft leather bag slung over each shoulder, having not had to check any baggage. I went directly to immigration and on to customs. A woman inspector sauntered up to the paint chipped table where my bags lay opened. Taking stock of my three cameras, a half dozen lenses, and fifty rolls of film, she noticed that I had an extra undeclared carton of cigarettes.

“Oh, you have too many cigarettes”, she whispered apologetically.

“Yes. I smoke too much”. I answered.

“Oh, I smoke too”, she replied.

“Perhaps you would like to try a few packs”, I offered.

“As you wish”. She answered, stashing a few packs below the shelf.

Zippering my bags shut, the customs exam was evidently finished, and I

strolled out to the rusting taxi stand.

From the crumbling rusted shell of my taxi window, an unseen wind from a passing truck lifted a flattened feather light dog corpse off the roiling pavement. It was April, the hot season. I went down to Barr St. and stepped into a tea shop, sitting down on a low wooden stool. I looked into the street as lanky sinuous men and expansivehipped women, both clad in tight fitting sarongs, filed by the doorway, clutching torn packages, puffing on long cheroots, steeped in their ambitions, offering no more than an occasional side glance. The Burmese sat and drank tea which they poured into.

Unmatched saucers, like cats. Stepping out of the tea shop and into the night, I caught a trishaw and drove down a dirt road through huge twisting banyan trees with roots like petrified serpents, in the darkness people crouched burning candles which threw long distorted shadows across the road.

The next morning, I dressed and took the elevator downstairs to the lobby. As the elevator door opened, I was met by a wedding party with flashbulbs exploding. The groom wore white with a saffron colored Burmese turban with a wing on the side, and the bride wore pink silk and a transparent silk over covering like a cocoon. Her hair was stacked up upon her head like a pastry with a garland of yellow padauk flowers. Around her neck she wore a three tiered necklace of pure gold set with pomegranate sized rubies and dazzling diamond earrings. The procession had many bridesmaids in paper thin silk, and dozens of children in satin pastels, but none were as beautiful as the bride.

In Burma there is a tradition of passing a dowry of jewels from mother to daughter on the wedding day. So old are many of these diamonds, that I am sure they originally came from the first source of diamonds, golconda in India. Even in the earliest days there had been trade between burmese rubies and indian diamonds. These stones were large in size, sometimes slightly yellowish and often imperfect. In Burma diamonds are worn backwards, that is with the flat table side down against the earlobe, and the sharpened pavillion or backside which came to a point called the culet, was worn outwards reflecting the light in long angular prisms of color.

One woman standing near me had diamond earrings of eight to ten carats in each ear. I noticed that both stones had large facets telling me that they had been cut a very long time ago. I began to comment on her magnificent tearings. Every time that she moved her head, dazzling colors shot out like searchlights. She removed one icy diamond by unscrewing the back, and i took a closer look. She inquired if I was in the business, and i nodded yes. I asked her where I might find the brides mother who had invited me to this wedding. She grabbed my hand whisking me through the crowd, and within seconds I was standing in front of a patrician woman with a high receding forehead. Her hair must have been incredibly long as it was piled up in voluminous coils at the side of her head and held into place with a tortoise shell comb. On her finger, which looked like a curling pink shrimp, she wore a single pearl as large as a hazelnut.

The next morning was a sunday and I got a call from a stranger, apparently somebody in the diamond trade, whom I thought must be the brides mother, had recommended to the stranger that I was a knowledgeable gemologist and a reliable man who could help him in the purchase of some extraordinary diamonds which had just arrived from Hong Kong. The deal had to be consummated today, he said, as the diamond dealer had to be on a plane early the next morning. I could not be told who had recommended me as it would be a loss of face for me to know their identity. It was explained to me clearly that besides having a standing favor in Rangoon, I would also be paid a good deal of money based on the value of the stones. The gems in question were said to be four of the finest d color, flawless diamond, each several carats in weight. I told the stranger that if I appraised the stones, i was going to be paid whether the deal went off or not. He agreed and said that he was staying at the strand hotel.

I explained that since today was Sunday, everything was closed and suggested that he wait until Monday for the laboratories to be opened so a complete report on the quality of the gems could be made. Again, he told me that was impossible and that the seller could not wait till Monday, and had only today to show the stones. It seemed like a weird set-up to me, who would be in such a rush when so much was at stake, but I knew that I by chance happened to have a loose diamond a ruby and an emerald with me. I also had a 10x loupe, a small flashlight, and a pair of tweezers, hardly enough equipment for a through examination and gemological analysis to enable a confident purchase of such magnitude. Even with proper equipment, an evaluation of diamonds in the top qualities is hard enough. Internal

characteristics particular to diamonds can be seen and a clarity grade given. Judging diamonds against comparison stones of a known color can accurately give a color grade. The cut of a stone and how far it conforms or varies from the ideal can be clearly seen.

However, to evaluate the absolute top of the line diamonds, apparently colorless and flawless, on a Sunday afternoon with the barest of equipment, having so much money hanging in the balance, was crazy. One degree of color difference, one degree of clarity difference could mean thousands of dollars, and I didn't have comparison stones.

The stranger told me that my help would be greatly appreciated. I had nothing to lose. The stones were not my stones. The money was not my money. Ambush me for what? Ok, I agreed to represent the buyer. I told him again that whether the deal went off or not, I was going to get paid. This being settled, the stranger gave me a room number at the strand, and a time to meet. I hung up and showered, ate some breakfast and was walking across the marble lobby of the strand before noon.

The room was one of the old suites which overlooked the port. I knocked and the door swung open. Both of us were confronted by that vacuum of suspicion, primitive and dangerous. The bottle thick glasses magnified his owl black eyes, and made the diminutive gentleman look like an impeccably dressed watchmaker. My fear evaporated.

Glancing around at the foot of the bed near a peach colored pillow, the money was stacked up in neat piles. I contented myself by sitting in a sturdy chair at the scrolled desk, and placed my chamois and tools at the side. In a few minutes the seller showed up. He was a middle aged chinese, neatly dressed in a well tailored nondescript suit. The chinese man came in, looked over at the money and brought the diamonds out of a hidden inner pocket.

Wrapped in white diamond papers stating the weights, color and clarity, he handed the papers to me and I sat down in the chair, picked up my loupe, tweezers and flashlight. I removed my three stones, the diamond, the ruby and the emerald from my pocket and put them on the table. His diamond papers opened revealing the inner waxy blue papers used to make diamonds appear even more pure.

The weights looked good, three to five carats each, just the size to enable easy liquidity. I then began to examine each stone under 10x power, and each appeared to be flawless. Laying them down on the white paper, face down and side by side, they all looked colorless as well. The cuts were very well proportioned, the largest diameter of the stone separating the crown or top part from the pavillion or bottom part is called the girdle. This girdle can vary from very thin, which may chip to very thick which does not contribute to the beauty, but certainly does contribute to the price. The girdle is the place where the maximum amount of weight could be saved by the cutter, and diamonds are sold by weight. On nine out of ten diamonds, this girdle is of a granular or sugary appearance. Occasionally a portion of the natural outer skin of the rough diamond crystal is left behind, as a mark of the cutter, showing how well he utilized the original rough. Sometimes this girdle is polished absolutely smooth. The girdle on each of these stones was polished smooth, which I thought strange but possible if the same cutter was employed for each of these stones.

Something else struck me as wrong however. Polishing marks from the wheel were evident on each of the stones. Why would a cutter, I wondered, working with the very finest material like this, do such a poor job of polishing the girdle? Why was the polishing finish on each of these stones the same? To find one stone like this is possible, but four stones together of this top quality, all with polished girdles showing wheel marks? No, it was impossible. Something was wrong.

All of the stones were flawless, so there was nothing in the internal characteristics to identify it as diamond. Color would also be of no assistance. The only test available to me to conclusively determine what this material was, had to be specific gravity. Specific gravity essentially measures the differences in density by hydrostatic weighing. The specific gravity of a substance is constant within a certain narrow range. Diamond has a specific gravity of 3.52. Emerald is lighter at 2.72 and ruby is the most dense at 4.00. Water is not a heavy enough liquid for a test and I had no heavy liquids for testing.

The buyer and the seller sat in the room slightly agitated awaiting an answer. I asked the buyer, the spectacled watchmaker, to call room service and order me a tall glass of cointreau without ice. He knitted his furry brow but picked up the phone to order. Meanwhile, I sat back in the deep leather chair and smoked a cigarette. The strained tension in the room was so electric, but I blew smoke rings and didn't want to look at either of them and reveal a clue.

In strand fashion, the room boy in a starched white suit arrived with the tall glass of cointreau on a silver tray, and brought it to my table. Giving him a few hundred kyats, I waited until the door shut behind him and picked up my diamond with the tweezers, the one I had brought with me, and suspended it underneath the thick clear liquor to break the surface tension, and dropped it in a liquid free fall. I mentally noted the known diamond's rate of falling as I brought it nearly to the surface and released again.

Then I took the chinese seller's diamonds and one by one, holding them under the surface of the cointreau, released them and watched the rate of sinkage. Invariably, his diamonds fell at a rate almost twice that of my diamond. I compared my diamond to the rate of sinkage with my ruby. The ruby, possessing a greater density than my diamond, sank

noticeably quicker. I then submerged his diamond with my ruby and released them into the cointreau at the same time. Holding my face closely to the glass of cointreau, I saw his diamond sink more quickly than my ruby. Something was definitely wrong. Estimating a ratio of sinkage between the two materials, I determined his diamond must be substantially softer than natural diamond owing to the distinct polishing marks on the girdle of every one of his stones. I crossed the room and had the chinese seller and the European buyer observe the test with their own eyes. Several times I performed the hydrostatic test in the cointreau as they looked on incredulously.

I told them that in my opinion as a gemologist that these stones were not diamond, in fact could not be diamond, but were a russian simulant, cubic zirconium, which has a specific gravity of 5.70 nearly double that of real diamond, and that is why they fell twice as fast while submerged in the cointreau.

The buyer hastily gathered up his money and stuffed it into a bag. The chinese seller became the red color of a thermometer bulb, spitting in cantonese staccato, and in English how thirty years in the business made him an expert and how his people in Hong Kong were beyond reproach, but he knew that the test could not lie. If he wasn't trying to swindle, then he had been swindled. Either way, the deal was off.

I dried off and repapered his stones and handed them back to him. I turned to the bushy browed buyer, and he dug into his bag and handed me a fee. I ran my thumb over the corners to make sure that all of the bills had Franklin's picture engraved, stuffed them into my pocket, shook his hand, saw the out the seller, waited a few minutes while I drank the cointreau, and quickly caught a taxi to the Shwe Dagon pagoda.Â

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