



To the Gem Pits,
Ratnapura, Ceylon.



A Tale of a Royal Stone.



By JAMES HAYWARD,
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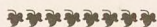


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To the Gem Pits, RATNAPURA, CEYLON



THE coach was standing outside the mail office. Driver whip in hand—passengers all on board and ready to start directly Her Majesty's mails were made up. The guard, or to speak more correctly, the horse-keeper, gave an occasional tootle on his horn just as a reminder that we were waiting.

I might as well, while this delay occurs, explain something more about Her Majesty's coach and its destination. It was the daily mail that ran from the capital of Ceylon, Colombo, to the famous city of Ratnapura (otherwise the city of gems). I don't think we could have made quite the turn-out fit for Hatchett's and Piccadilly ; for, though by dignity called a coach, it was difficult to trace the resemblance to our well-horsed equipages in England, except perhaps in the wheels. It might be better described as a festive funeral car, being built on a similar pattern, but relieved by its Oriental red, green, blue, and various colours. The screws were about as evenly matched as one sees in matrimonial pairs—a very tall wife and an exceedingly short

husband; and what struck me at the time was the simple harness arrangements, consisting of a couple of horses to pull the vehicle and a couple of reins to guide. I had occasion afterwards to prove the wisdom of this simple equipment. When the first stage was completed and we were thoroughly clear of the town our second pair was brought out. Directly they got in sight of the vehicle they both proceeded to set to partners, and, playfully rearing in front and kicking behind, succeeded in dislodging the scanty traps that held them. By caressing strokes they were gradually induced to drop the heroic position and stand on four legs, and, aided by convenient bits of coir yarn, the tattered harness was soon readjusted.

Again they were led to the pole, and, being cajoled into allowing the inside traces to be fixed, they commenced a side action which entirely prevented any further fixing up. However, it appeared this was all that the natives expected, for off started the coach, with a runner each side holding the off traces, which were adroitly slipped on the bar the moment the pair took to straight running.

For a first experience I must confess this was rather exciting, and having the privilege of securing a box seat—being a European and paying double fare—I began to think I should prefer to waive this privilege and get inside, but our Jehu, who was a burgher (a class called half-caste, as the Eurasians in India), assured me that it was the correct thing, and that gentlemen, as a rule, rather liked the fun. I decided to be a gentleman for once and try to enjoy it.

As far as my recollection serves me, I think the stages were every seven miles, but whether they were carefully measured with a tape or a rough guess made I do not know. Some of the stages, however, seemed to be uncommonly long sevens. As we got further into the country and more sparsely populated grew the villages, the worse grew the pairs. Some of them seemed to be like the fiery, untamed that carried Mazeppa, as if they smelt leather for the first time. The box seat became unpleasantly warm. I seemed to be a kind of juror to award prizes for the best shaped horse-shoes, for an extensive exhibition of these useful and glittering appendages were constantly being brought to my notice. After a playful quarter of an hour the the sagacious beasts were invariably started, but almost as invariably with the one trace. It has since occurred to me that perhaps the confusion of tongues was the cause for much of this eccentric jibbing and plunging, for threats were alternately screamed in sound Cingalese and other (to me) unknown languages.

I had forgotten to mention that at the first stage the box seat, which was calculated to hold the driver and two riders, but which had seemed just sufficient accommodation for one decent-sized man, was suddenly filled on the wedge principle by the addition of a very portly gentleman, who dovetailed himself in, as it were, until we were as firm as a very superior piece of cabinet work. Fortunately he proved to be a most genial companion, and amply compensated for the slight inconvenience and want of space. He was travelling with some native priests bound to some religious festival.

It happened to be a fast period, when, according to the regulations of the Buddhist, all true believers abstained from food between certain hours. As our first rest was a district called Avisawella, where we were due about mid-day—the hour at which unfortunately the priests could not eat—at request of my substantial acquaintance, we perpetrated a pious fraud by putting our watches back some half-hour. By this means we afforded them an opportunity of nourishing their bodies without, I hope, endangering their souls.

To those who are accustomed to travel in European countries, the rest-house or hotel would conjure up a vision of a comfortable bar, with attendant Hebe to minister to the wants of thirsty travellers, and a well-spread table only waiting operations with knife and fork ; but away in the jungle, where the daily coach may bring one or more Europeans or sometimes none at all, the joints are limited. As the coach draws up to the rest-house, and the number of passengers is ascertained, the coolie is dispatched after the straying poultry, and soon is heard a clacking of as many birds as are necessary for the requirements of the party. Beheaded and popped into scalding water before the death struggle is finished, the disjointed bird, with an accompaniment of rice, is smoking on a dish before you within twenty minutes of its capture. This culinary process is scarcely calculated to ensure a tender dish. But hunger is a fine sauce, and legs and wings are soon disposed of, considering the hurried mode and the fact that Indian fowls are regular pedestrians, straying miles daily. It is a masticatory feat to polish off these birds in the limited

time allowed for resting. Soon the horsekeeper's tootle advises us to make the last bolt, and in a few minutes we are off again, galloping through paddy fields and jungle, and passing some of the prettiest scenery to be seen in the world.

In another hour or two the last stage is reached, and with aching bones and cramped limbs we are soon again in luxurious ease in our lounging chairs : and, being a more important centre, the City of Gems, we are able to secure something like the comforts of the capital.

I must confess great disappointment at my first sight of the famous City of Gems. Why city ? I suppose on the American plan, two houses make a town. The principal street or road is a row of native huts. These huts significantly show the place to be a gem district, for in most of the boutiques, or shops, which are open like our local fishmongers, were heaps of rough precious stones, exposed in the same way as at a fishmonger's.

Although these stones are called precious that is scarcely the correct term to apply. True they are real sapphires, rubies, chyroberyls, catseyes, etc., but so utterly useless and valueless for commercial purposes that but for the native's reluctance to part with anything of the nature of a stone they might just as well be thrown back into the pits. The trade in precious stones for hundreds of years has been almost exclusively in the hands of Moormen (of Arabic descent) who are Mahommedans, and who, as experts in gems and for ability and cunning for bartering, stand unrivalled among the dealers of the world. Their system of trading is peculiar to themselves. From cupidity and a

belief that all Europeans, and especially English people, are fair subjects for cheating, they are ready to palm off a piece of coloured glass or a worthless stone for the most extravagant sum ; and as unsuspecting travellers are both numerous and rich, a splendid harvest is made.

I once saw a piece of glass worth about 2s., and no doubt hailing from Paris or Birmingham, for which a trusting visitor had paid 500 rs. or about £40 sterling.

After a visit to a few of these native shops, in all of which I was shown the most rubbishy stuff, it began to be noised about that I was an expert, and more valuable gems were produced, but at such absurd prices that it was impossible to deal.

A curious custom prevails amongst these dealers. After seating their customer in a chair they begin by bringing out first the most awful rubbish ; then at each rejection the quality improves. Any sign of impatience or desire to hurry will ruin all chance of buying. Like a diplomatist, the way to succeed is to studiously avoid asking for what you really want. After a time—it may be hours, it may be days—you will succeed in meeting the object you desire. During this dilatory fencing the neighbours crowd around, and for hours will stand gazing, although not understanding a word. There are two reasons for this persistent curiosity. One is the curiosity itself, the other is a chance of deriving some benefit, for to ensure a barter a broker is appointed. First he addresses himself to the buyer, and, to avoid the utterance of the price demanded, he holds the buyer's hand covered with a handkerchief, and by signs indicates the sum—this amount is communicated to the

seller in the same way—and eventually, after an agreed sum is arranged, the bargain is concluded, the broker taking his percentage. Now the persistent attention of the crowd is rewarded according to ancient custom, the broker takes half his percentage, the other portion is divided amongst the crowd.

After a night's rest, not of the soundest, for the moist heat of Ratnapura is favourable to the development of most rapacious mosquitoes and other enemies to slumber, I was visited by my fellow traveller, who, I learned, was a well-known lecturer on theosophy. Being the Perihara, or native festival, he had been invited by some influential Buddhists to lecture. One of the natives, a wealthy landowner in the district, as his contribution to the funds of the Theosophical Society, had agreed to permit gemming on his land, the proceeds of the digging to go towards the cause. The object of this gentleman's visit was to solicit my assistance as an expert to value what gems might be discovered.

The term "gem pit" had led me to expect something of the nature of a miniature coal pit, but a second time I was taught the folly of drawing on my imagination; for, as I soon found and afterwards confirmed, the gem pits are nothing more elaborate than an ordinary ground pit which we frequently see at the side of the railways.

After consultation, we selected a low-lying piece of ground, surrounded by jungle, but adjoining the main road, and which was in the midst of what is known as the gem district, marking out a spot of about eight feet; two

coolies were set to dig, using the mamotte, which is the native spade. In about one hour a very considerable hole was made, the soil from which was piled at the side. Very soon the excavation began to show water filtering through, and as the hole was deepened it increased until the coolies were up to their waists in water.

Having sufficient soil to test, the coolies were instructed to work it in this mode, which, though, simple, was very effectual. One of them held a closely woven basket, which he half-filled with soil, and whilst rapidly turning it round and round, the second coolie continually poured water over it until the soil was entirely removed, leaving only pebbles and stones. In a short time the whole of the soil was washed, and there stood before us the Lottery Heap, for it was possible amongst that mass of pebble might be found that valuable gem. Alas! the valuable gem was not there. The result of our morning's labour was a handful of sapphires, catseyes, chyroberlyls, etc., but not one that would be worth expending time in cutting, and the heap was in consequence valueless. Although I did not personally continue this particular digging, yet I believe it was conducted for several days, yielding many handfuls of stones each day, but—one gem only worth cutting value about 20 rupees, or 30s. sterling.

It is not to be supposed that luck does not sometimes visit the digger. Previous to my experience just related, not very far distant in a more extensive pit, some very large stones had been discovered, two or three valued over £1,000; but Nature, though bountiful in

quantity, is very reserved in quality, and few fine stones are ever found, perhaps to the extent only of one in 1,000, or even less. From this cause fine stones retain their standard value.

It is very natural to suppose that in an undertaking like gem digging, where so much value is represented in such little bulk, much dishonesty prevails. As a fact, there is more integrity shown amongst the natives to each other than in many a trade in England, for the coolies who dig and the other persons who assist in working the pits are invariably members of the family, or coolies that have been born and reared under the protection of the richer native. It is not an uncommon thing to see brothers, uncles, cousins to a distant degree all maintained by the one head. Still, there are cases in which dishonest diggers attempt to secret the valuable stones. I once had a large sapphire in my hand that was said to have been cut from a native after death. It was a very large and irregular crystal of sapphire, and having an appearance of some value, the finder was induced to secret it in his mouth or throat. It is a well-known juggling feat in India for a man to so dispose of several large pebbles, which by constant and early practice he can disgorge at will. Whether the rough edges of the crystal prevented its return or what I cannot say; but my informant explained that the man was in a choking state and attended by a native doctor, but too late, and he shortly died, and the stone was cut from his throat. There is no doubt that many gems are secreted and sold surreptitiously to unscrupulous merchants, who are ever ready to make a bargain without

enquiring too strictly into the way they came into possession of the seller.

With all the cunning of their class, the junglemen sometimes will make a mistake, and by their cupidity over-reach themselves. On one occasion one of their men who had been very successful bought an unusually large stone in the rough condition—I believe for the sum of about 50 rupees or £4 sterling. It was partly cut and polished, and certainly developed into a very curious specimen. Opinions varied as to its value, but it was acknowledged to be a very uncommon stone. Several native dealers competed for it, and, influenced by a desire to outbid them all, one offered about 10,000 rupees. Possibly he was under the impression that it was a fancy ruby, as its colour was reddish, with a tint of yellow—indeed, the owner called it a ruby. The offer of 2,000 rupees was indignantly refused, and it was sent to London priced at a most absurd sum of several hundred pounds, where, most unfortunately for the owner, it was pronounced to be a topaz, and returned. the last time I heard of it, the poor owner was in great difficulties, for he had mortgaged a share of it for a 1,000 rupees, and not being able to realise the money or sell the stone for anything like that price, was daily regretting his folly in not accepting the first offers.

It is astonishing what results are obtained by the native operator with such wretched appliances. With a common bow he will revolve his mill and cut and polish in a dexterous manner nearly equal to his European rival. But so prejudiced is he in favour of cutting the stones as large as possible without considering

the adaptability for jewellery purposes, that almost every gem has to be recut before it is fit for the London market, and so a great waste of stuff and increased cost is caused.

Ceylon is considered to be one of the richest soils for precious stones in quantity and variety. Almost every gem is to be found there except the diamond. Two thousand years ago it was the emporium for gems, and, still undiscovered, there lies beneath the surface immense values yet.





A Tale of a Royal Stone.



HOW long I had lain in the earth I cannot say. At the time I was discovered I gave but little heed to those matters ; but, from what I have since heard, it must have been many thousands of years ; but as I wish to retain a character for veracity, I do not intend to speculate upon my doubtful origin, whether by fire or water, or both, but to relate the actual facts which I can personally vouch for. My first introduction to the world—I might almost call it my birth—was purely an accidental one. For hours, although in complete darkness, I was conscious something unusual was happening. A continuous grating noise had been growing louder each instant, and at last I felt myself raised up with a mass of dirt and stones and dropped violently on the ground at the side of the pit. For a moment or so the strong light nearly blinded me as it pierced right through my crystal and came out at my other side. I was not long left to think of the new world I had just been tossed into, for my new acquaintance, a black naked digger, instantly seized hold of me, and after a few moment's scrutiny, began to jump

wildly about, tossing his hands and behaving like a demented being. I felt so alarmed as he brandished me about that I began to wish myself back again in my old bed ; but presently he became more composed, and hastened away, carrying me with him. After traversing the jungle for a short distance, he arrived at a mean looking village consisting of about a dozen dirty palm-roofed huts, into one of which I was carried. On the floor, squatting on mats, were three or four natives, similar to the digger, to whom I was shown, and here, again, was repeated the wild and noisy dance which first alarmed me. I soon found out the cause of this excitement by the oft repeated cry of "Y'durium mee-cham nalla mee-cham !" which meant I was a very large cat's-eye. From the conversation that followed when they were tranquilized, I learnt that for many years nothing had been found of such importance and value, and that the pit where I was discovered was on the ground owned by the Buddhist Temple in the neighbourhood. By this time large numbers of villagers had gathered round the door, for the news of the great find was soon noised about. For the next few days I was continually being unpacked and shown to the various visitors. One morning I noticed one of them who appeared different to the rest. Instead of being nearly nude, as were the rest of the villagers, he had a long yellow robe which covered one shoulder, leaving the right arm bare. In his hand he carried a fan made from the palmetto tree. His head, unlike all the others, was clean shaven. I soon found out he was a Buddhist Priest, and from the respect paid, I judged him to be of

some rank. After examining me with great care, and appearing satisfied with the result, he gave instructions to his lapidary who was in attendance. It is not necessary to pursue all the experiences I now went through, how I was stuck into some horrible pigment, that fastened me tight down on a stick, and held for hours against a hard revolving wheel that ground my poor sides until I lost all my corners and became quite smooth and round. Although it was most painful at the time, I was very grateful for so much attention, for I must confess I was much improved in my appearance; my eye was much clearer, and my surface smooth and bright. I hope I shall not be considered too conceited; but I certainly felt a pleasure at hearing myself so admired and called a Royal Stone.

As I was the property of the Temple, it was decided that I should make one of the eyes of their great god. In a short time I was mounted in a gold setting and securely fastened in the right eye of the idol. As it was considered highly improbable that I could be ever matched, the left was filled by a very large stone, but of much inferior value to myself. Here I remained for many years, guarded most jealously, and only exhibited on rare occasions, such as a festival, or when some great prince or royal visitor came.

I had frequent opportunities of hearing my value and appearance dwelt upon; for, whenever, I was exhibited, the most extravagant sum was quoted as my worth; and every one acknowledged I was a royal stone. I noticed that on great festival days the admiration of the common people was divided between myself

and the sacred tooth of Buddha ; though what people could see in a tooth to admire, I never could understand. On these occasions the temple used to be decorated with Palm leaves and bundles of cocoa-nuts hanging about. Different coloured cloths were hung upon painted bamboos, forming screens and clouds, and at night hundreds of lamps, burning cocoa-nut oil and incense, made the air so thick and offensive I could scarcely endure it ; but what I enjoyed most was the procession, which took place on the last day. Two of the largest elephants were richly decorated with embroidered cloths, and a large gold braided band across the shoulders, from which was suspended on each side a bell, clanging at every movement of the beast. On a kind of howdah, or stand, a gold and silver Dagoba, enriched with precious stones, was fastened ; and this enshrined the sacred tooth. On the other elephant was placed a similar stand, upon which was carried the God, of which I formed an important part. In this way, followed by a number of smaller and less elaborately decorated elephants, who carried the priests, &c., we marched from one temple to another, constantly accompanied by thousands of worshippers, who gathered in numbers as we went along. I don't think I have, even at the Royal Courts of England, or elsewhere, ever witnessed a scene so beautiful. The distant paddy fields, with their rich green shoots ; the darker and fuller foliage of the trees in the background ; right away still further the distant tops of the mountains, some of the more prominent golden with the sunlight ; the red dusty roads that wound like huge serpents

amongst the green, and thousands of gaily dressed natives, with every hue of the rainbow in contrast with their own dusky skins; it is not possible for a hard crystallized chrysoberyl as I am, to feel sentimental and poetical; but I confess that I felt a refraction right through me as I gazed upon such a lovely sight, and regretted that my future life was to be shut up in the dusky closeness of the temple. On the last occasion, when I was present at the festival, a very alarming affair occurred, which nearly caused the death of some hundreds of the natives. How they escaped was a miracle. It was customary for the elephant which carried the sacred tooth to lead the procession. He was one of the largest animals in the country, and had been presented to the temple by a rich headman, who had captured him, many years before, in one of the kraals. He was very tractable, except on certain occasions, when, in his fury, he had killed more than one of his keepers. Whether it was from the shouting of the people or what, I cannot say, but soon after starting he began to swing his trunk about and trumpet loudly. All of a sudden, notwithstanding the effort of his driver, who stuck the iron point into his neck, he left the road and made for the trees, which lined the route, overturning on his way dozens of natives, who tumbled, screaming and shouting, as they went over. Seizing a large bough, about the thickness of a man's arm, he broke it off with the greatest ease, and dragging the mass of foliage resumed his position in the procession; but so large was the branch that in swinging it about he knocked over a large number of natives like ninepins.

At the sight of the first elephant's action, the one upon which I was carried closely repeated the process of dismembering a large bough, followed by each elephant in turn, until every one had trailing by his side a mass of foliage, which, coming in contact with the natives, caused a general upset.

It was on my return from this procession that a circumstance happened that led to my change of life. The people had all departed from their homes, and the village was resuming its quiet and ordinary appearance. The gates of the temple had been shut, and most of the priests had retired to rest when, by a solitary lamp which was left always burning at night, I saw two naked figures stealing out from the gloom and approaching the idol. It flashed across me, from the stealthy way in which they approached, that their object was to steal me, being a stone of great value. Fortunately, in moving about, one of them disturbed a sleeping priest, who quickly alarmed the rest, and seeing it was dangerous to delay, the villains decamped ; but this incident, and the fear of its repetition, perhaps another time with more success, alarmed the Head Priest, who saw in the possession of so valuable a property inducement for robbery. So an opportunity was soon afforded of parting with me for a large sum of money, when I became the property of a wealthy Moorman, who conveyed me to the capital. For a short time I was again publicly exhibited, but as very few buyers were likely to be found for so large a sum as was demanded for me, I was shipped off to London. On my arrival I was taken to a very illustrious gentleman, who was a

great collector of fine stones, and, after some barter, became his property. Here I felt at ease, for I reposed in a velvet case amongst other very fine gems, and was the constant admiration of many beautiful ladies and noble gentlemen. Unfortunately, this agreeable time was soon to end. My noble patron died, and again I was to endure a change of masters.

For the first time I was put up at a public auction. Many were the bids made for me, but to my disgust, none of them ever reached the value that had been placed upon me in my native home. At last I was knocked down, and became the property of a private, but wealthy, gentleman. For a few months I remained in obscurity ; I saw and heard little of the surrounding world. One day, when I was despairing of ever seeing life again, my master unlocked my casket and carried me away. After a short railway journey, I found myself being exhibited on a table in a magnificently decorated room. Before the table was seated a royal lady. I heard my master, as he respectfully bowed his head, crave the permission to present me to his Royal Sovereign. I then learned that my new owner, who had accepted me as a Jubilee offering, was none other than the Queen of England.

March, 1888.







