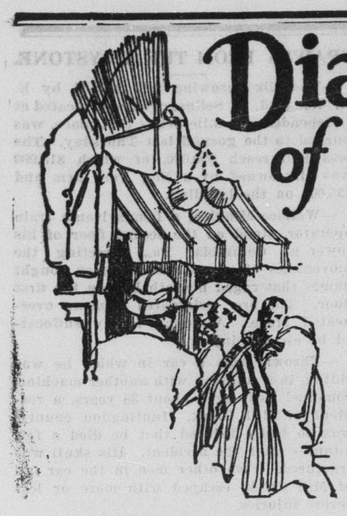

Diamonds of Malopo

by

VICTOR ROUSSEAU

(Continued from last week).

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—Winton Garrett, twenty-five and just out of college, calls by appointment on Archie Garrett, his New York cousin and executor, to receive his inheritance of $100,000. Archie, honest, an easy mark and a fool for luck, assures Winton that he is practically a millionaire, as he has invested all but $10,000 in a rubber plantation in either the East or West Indies and in a controlling interest in the Big Malopo diamond mine, somewhere or other in South Africa, sold him as a special favor by a Dutch promoter named De Witt.

CHAPTER II.—Winton, en route to his mine, finds the town of Taungs wildly excited over a big strike at Malopo, including the 95-carat "De Witt diamond." Two coach passengers are a disreputable old prospector, Daddy Seaton, and his daughter Sheila. On the journey a passenger, who turns out to be De Witt himself, insults Sheila. Winton fights De Witt and knocks him out. Sheila tells him to turn back. She says that her father is a broken English army officer, who has killed a man and is therefore in De Witt's power, that De Witt is all-powerful, being backed by Judge Davis, president of the diamond syndicate and also the resident magistrate and judge of the native protectorate.

CHAPTER III.—Winton finds Malopo in a turmoil, both over the strike and the theft of the De Witt diamond. Winton foolishly discloses his identity to Sam Simpson, a Jamaican negro, subeditor of the local newspaper. He more wisely confides in Ned Burns, watchman at the Big Malopo, who tells him that the syndicate has planned to take control of the mine the next morning.

CHAPTER IV.—Winton finds that Sheila is cashier at the restaurant. He offers his friendship. She rebuffs him. Van Vorst, a notorious diamond thief, one of De Witt's men, slips the stolen De Witt diamond into Winton's pocket and two policemen club Winton and arrest him. He escapes them and when at his last gasp Sheila takes him into her house, bathes his wounds and saves him from his pursuers.

CHAPTER V.—The next morning Sheila offers Winton help in escaping from Malopo. He convinces her with difficulty that he did not steal the De Witt diamond and that he is president of the Big Malopo company. Bruised and blood-stained he runs across town, breaks by force into the company meeting, and aided by a popular demonstration proves his identity, blocks the reorganization and takes control. He asks Sheila to marry him. She laughs hysterically and refuses him.

CHAPTER VI.—Winton hires Seaton as compound manager and develops Big Malopo. Judge Davis, a philosophical old hypocrite of unknown past, offers him the syndicate's co-operation. "Otherwise, he says, "we'll smash you, you d—d young fool."

Somewhere far back in Winton's memory a voice was saying:

"As you go through the world you'll find it doesn't pay to blurt out your mind. Try to have a little reticence."

It was Archie's voice, and Archie's bland and childlike face came vividly into Winton's mind. But he went on, heedless of the words which rang in his head:

"I own nearly all the shares in the company, and Mr. De Witt hardly any. He has been planning to get control of the concern, thinking that since I was supposed to be in America and was unrepresented by any proxy, it would be easy to oust me.

"Then he learned that I was in Malopo, and that it was I who thrashed him for his behavior to you in the coach. He set to work at once, pretended that the diamond had been stolen, and planted it on me, through the medium of a short man whom I met on the porch of the Continental last night. The police set upon me and took the stone from my pocket. I had never dreamed that it was there. I escaped them and ran, because I can't

"A short man," she said, "planted the stone on you."

afford to go to jail, even for a few days, with so much at stake."

She looked at him in doubt and wonder.

"A short man," she said, "planted the stone on you. A short man with black eyes and a heavy mustache?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"Everybody knows him," answered Sheila. "He is Van Vorst, the most notorious diamond thief in South Africa [illegible] escaped the breakwater He has never been caught yet. If he [illegible] long enough, no doubt he will become a millionaire and a pillar of society. On account of his ingenuity the big men, being unable to punish him, buy him. They use him to trap other thieves, and in crooked deals of all kinds. That explains Van Vorst's freedom in Malopo. Mr. De Witt used him to trap you. Oh, Mr Garrett, I am sorry for having suspected you. I should have known; but indeed in my heart I did know that you were a good man."

She broke down in complete distress. With the realization that she had misjudged him there came upon her vividly a sense of overwhelming shame at her situation with Winton in the little house. Her face was hidden by her hands, but her throat was scarlet.

"I shall go this morning," said Winton. "The company meets at ten to turn over the property to the syndicate, and I have to be on hand—"

She started and looked at him in fear. "At ten, did you say?" she cried. "It is ten o'clock now!"

She drew a little cheap watch from the front of her dress and held it out. Winton saw that the hands were almost upon the hour.

With this the pain left him, he felt his old vigor in all his limbs; the terrible emergency nerved him. He looked round for his hat, found it; then Sheila was holding him by the arms.

"Wait a moment!" she cried half hysterically. "You can't go like that, Mr. Garrett. Wait only one moment!"

She darted into her room, seized the towel, wrung it out in water, and, running back, snatched off his hat and began washing his forehead. A stain of blood came away. She looked at him almost as tenderly as a mother.

"Now you can go, she said. "I know it is right; God be with you."

Winton was outside and running across the court. The Chamber of Commerce was situated at the southeast corner of the market square. He had seen it on the preceding day, a handsome block, one of the finest buildings in Malopo. It might take him ten minutes to reach it. It was questionable whether he would arrive in time.

He ran on, panting, choosing the shortest way, which fortunately did not lead past the Continental, where he would almost certainly have been recognized. On he raced, through the narrower streets, alive with fruit peddlers and old-clothes men, who stopped and stared in wonder at the sight of the wild-looking man with blood on his face and dusty clothing, and screamed in shrill abuse as he hurled their carts right and left and cleared a passage down the middle of the road.

The market square lay before him, a tangle of transport wagons and oxen. Winton dodged here and there, threading the mazes, panted across, and saw the Chamber of Commerce building in front of him.

He heard men shouting behind him. A crowd was collecting, following him. He looked like a madman, unless he was the bearer of desperate news of some rising in the outlying districts. A policeman tried to intercept him. Winton hurled the man aside, dashed into the building, and ran with sure instinct up the cement steps to the second story. Upon a door in front of him he saw the name of the Big Malopo, painted in small lettering among the names of twenty other companies, yet staring at him as if he alone were there.

A man rushed at Winton from somewhere in the passage and collared him. Winton thought he recognized him as one of the coach passengers. There was no doubt that De Witt had placed him there on guard. He was larger than Winton and powerfully built, but Winton got the door partly open and wedged himself there.

He saw a number of men, who had been seated about a table inside the room, leap to their feet. At the head was a tall, lean old man with a short, square white beard. Near him was De Witt, still carrying on his face the bruises of the fight. The others were obviously nonentities.

Winton saw what was happening, and his fury lent him new strength. He struggled madly in the grasp of his assailant, and the chief shareholder in the Big Malopo company, entangled with De Witt's spy, rolled into the room at the feet of the astonished small shareholders.

De Witt, who had been speaking, smashed his fist down on the table.

"Throw that lunatic out, and let's put this business through!" he yelled. "The proposition is that this company go into voluntary liquidation for the purpose of reconstruction and the issue of preferred stock. I declare the motion—"

"I oppose it!" shouted Winton, leaping to his feet and fighting off De Witt's man. "I am Winton Garrett, owning 80 per cent of the stock. My certificate—"

He tried to get his hand into his pocket, but his assailant was dragging him toward the door. There came a scuffle of feet in the passage, and the policeman, heading the mob, burst into the room.

In another moment Winton would have been flung down the stairs, and the control of the Big Malopo would have passed into the syndicate's hands, either forever, or pending complicated legal processes. But a sudden diversion completely changed the situation.

Out of the crowd stepped Ned Burns, white-haired, white-bearded, waving his arms furiously.

"You let Mr. Garrett go!" he shouted. "I know him, and I know you, Mr. De Witt. Discharge me, will you, after I've worked eight years for you?"

"Bravo, Ned!" shouted the crowd. "Go it, old cock!"

"The motion is carried!" shouted De Witt.

"That don't make no difference," said Ned, planting himself before him. "Maybe you think because I was fool enough to work for you eight years that I don't know the law, Mr. De Witt! You may be purser, but the law of the Colony requires that all proposals for liquidation must have the assent of a majority. Mr. Garrett owns the majority, and he hasn't voted yet."

"Well done, Ned!" cried the mob.

"Colony law don't run in Malopo!" shouted De Witt. "This is a native protectorate. You think because I've put you out of your job for inefficiency that you'll come here and interfere with this meeting, do you?"

"Let's hear Mr. Garrett!" cried the crowd.

A tall old man, looking much like Judge Davis, stepped forward. He was Van Beer, the head of an association of independent claimholders, and at the sight of him the noisy crowd became silent.

"I don't know what this is about, Mr. De Witt, but I take issue with you on the point you raise," he said. "You know that the credit of the diamond companies rests on the belief that Colony law is valid here. If you are basing any action upon a negative of this belief, it will send diamond shares shooting down to— Well, Judge Davis, you know how low they'll fall if you take away the security of Colony law from Malopo. Is there any other basis of credit, here, judge?"

"Gentlemen," cried Judge Davis in a tremulous voice, "what is all this quarrel about? Whether or not Colony law runs here has yet to be passed on by the Colony courts. We care nothing for that. We act according to our lights, believing in justice and fraternity."

"Then why don't you allow Mr. Garrett's vote?" shouted Ned Burns.

"If this gentleman is Mr. Garrett, let him produce proofs of his identity," quavered the judge.

Winton took his certificate and letter of introduction from his pocket, and handed them to the judge, who donned a pair of spectacles and examined them, finally handing them back to Winton. He approached De Witt and murmured something in a low voice.

"Speak up, judge!" shouted a man in the crowd.

"I think the meeting had better be adjourned pending a private conference," said Davis.

"I adjourn this meeting!" yelled De Witt furiously, and began to make his way through the crowd, which broke into ironical applause.

Ned turned to Winton.

"You win, Mr. Garrett," he said. "And you've got the best diamond claim this side of Kimberley."

Winton gripped the old man's hands, and his voice broke as he tried to thank him.

"That's all right, my boy," he answered. "It was along about midnight when I got the message that you'd be in danger this morning at the meeting. So I opened the Book, and, sure enough, there it was written down in black and white about Eglon, King of Moab, being stabbed in his summer house. So I saw you were Eglon, and this was the summer house, and you can bet I didn't sleep too much last night from worrying over it."

The crowd, which had increased until it filled the room and the greater part of the passage, showed in unmistakable ways where its sympathies lay. It surrounded Winton, patting him on the back and throwing out promiscuous invitations to drink. De Witt made for the passage. Judge Davis went up to Winton.

"This has been a very unfortunate misunderstanding, Mr. Garrett," he quavered. "I wish to tender you my fraternal regrets for the mistake due to the unceremonious manner of your appearance in the board room. I trust you will not feel any prejudice against the Diamond Fields Syndicate on account of it. We aim at the harmonious development of all local interests, for the common good. It is my ambition, and the ambition of our fellow citizens assembled here, to make Malopo a center of fraternity and brotherhood, and to enlist your aid in fighting for peace, purity, and temperance."

"Three cheers for Judge Davis! Hats off to the judge!" shouted the crowd.

Amid ironical applause, which seemed in nowise to disturb or disconcert him, and had its visible effect only in the tightened lip and in an increasing unctuousness which he seemed to diffuse, Judge Davis followed De Witt. Winton turned to Ned.

"I'll never forget," he said, "and you can count on a job with me as long as you want one."

Gripping the old man's hand again, he tried to make his way through the crowd. But by this time the enthusiasm had passed all restraint. He found himself seized and hoisted upon the shoulders of two men. Struggling ineffectively, he was carried down the stairs and into the bar of the nearest hotel, where he was deposited upon the counter. Somebody had ordered champagne, and in a trice the corks were popping and all were drinking Winton's health.

"You've done a good day's work for Malopo in keeping the independent mines out of the clutches of the syndicate," said Van Beer, who had followed in the wake of the crowd. "Take care that Davis doesn't get the Big Malopo away from you. We heard he'd been cursing himself for having unloaded on a bunch of asses in America, but that you should turn up at the nick of time, certificate and all—it's like a play, sir. Here's health to you!"

And he drained his glass.

Presently Winton managed to slip away from his admirers and escape into the street. And the insistent thought of Sheila pressed upon him—Sheila, awaiting to learn the news, eager for his success; Sheila, who had risked everything for him.

Winton went back as fast as he could walk toward the wretched house in the outskirts. He felt sick and weak now that the reaction had come upon him, but his heart was uplifted at the thought of Sheila; her faith, her loyalty, and her bitter fight. It was perhaps inevitable that men like Van Beer should misunderstand her. He felt no rancor on account of this; but he meant to take the girl out of her life, establish her with her father in a house on the claim, where the old man should find the employment that had been promised him by De Witt.

Sheila opened the door instantly when he tapped; she scanned his face eagerly.

"I've won," said Winton, and he saw the color fade out of her face. She leaned against the frame of the door, looking down.

Winton glanced out across the desert. The clean air seemed to rush through him, bringing vitality and strength and resolution. Far away he saw the blue mountains toward which Sheila and he had traveled out of the squalor of Taungs. They seemed now to be a symbol. At that moment the girl appeared to him like a wild bird, caught in the thin wires of a hundred conventions: her father's need of her, her utter dependence upon that society which outraged her pride and trod her heart under its feet, and yet held her in secure servitude. He knew the longing for freedom in her heart; he knew, too, that physical bondage had never quenched the freedom of her spirit.

He turned toward her, and she looked up and came quickly toward him and put her hands in his of her accord.

"I have been ungrateful to you," she said. "I want to speak plainly now. Last night when I asked you not to see me again it was because of many things which made it seem right that you should not: my father, and your pity, which I could not bear. And you are a gentleman, and I—I am not well educated, and—" She was breaking down, but she struggled on bravely. "But now you know why we must be strangers forever, after what has happened here and what people would say if they knew."

"No," answered Winton. "I do not know."

He drew her toward him. The sunlight lay like molten gold about them.

"I love you, Sheila, and I want you to be my wife."

She recoiled as if his words stupefied her. Then she began laughing hysterically.

"You are very generous and very kind," she said. "I understand your goodness. You are sorry for me from the depths of your heart, and you think you owe me reparation. No! That is final. Never! Never!"

She turned, as with an effort, and ran into the house. Winton stood looking after her until the door of the inner room was closed. He knew that only love could heal her spirit; was it not love that had woven the threads which had so strangely bound them since that morning when they looked at each other before the coach office in Taungs?

As he stood there, undecided, there came across the court the hiccuped chant of a popular song. Winton looked round. Daddy Seaton was coming stumbling home.

CHAPTER VI

Judge Davis Shows His Hand.

Winton's proposal of marriage had been in nowise an act inspired by the sense of having placed the girl in a false position. He loved Sheila. When he was away from her he realized the folly of his precipitancy; he knew nothing of her, and his sense of prudence reproached him. But in her presence he felt that without her existence would be hardly endurable.

He loved her, present or absent; only, absent, the conventions of his upbringing fenced in his mood and bade him wait. He resolved to wait, and he was confident that he could win her.

As soon as work began on the Big Malopo he meant to give her father the position of compound manager and to establish them near him. Meanwhile he moved from the Continental to another hotel of the same type, on the opposite side of the market square, where he slept and took his breakfast and supper. The rest of the day he spent on the claim.

On the day following the meeting in the chamber of commerce Judge Davis formally acknowledged Winton's claims. Winton's first act was to discharge De Witt and to appoint himself purser. He was thus in complete control of the Big Malopo.

Looking through the cost book in Judge Davis' office, he found that of the twenty shares not held by himself, Davis owned eight, and Hanson, the editor of the Chronicle, five. De Witt, who was simply the syndicate's dummy, had one share only. The remaining six were distributed among four local men, one of whom held three and the others a single share apiece.

Banking upon their ownership of the claim, the syndicate had obligingly relieved the purser of a large amount of trouble. They had been incredibly active since the discovery of the big diamond. Machinery had been ordered, the local brick field was turning out bricks for them, and a dozen transport wagons were already on their way from Taungs, loaded with timber. Agents were at work in the native territories securing gangs of laborers.

Winton appointed Ned Burns general overseer under him. The old man was very grateful for the position, which was better than any he had held in his life, and he was of the greatest aid to Winton in posting him as to the details of the work. He cautioned him against Judge Davis' friendliness as much as De Witt's enmity. Neither man would forego his hopes of obtaining the claim on behalf of the syndicate, he said.

Native labor was the chief problem the pick of the tribesmen being drawn off to the Kimberley fields and the Johannesburg gold mines. However the syndicate had agents scouring Bechuanaland, and the contracts held good. The compound was being constructed rapidly, not on the claim itself, which was too small and much too valuable, but on about three acres of land which had been acquired just beyond the diamond-bearing tract.

Here the natives would be housed. On either side were the compounds of the larger claims, flanking the diamond clay as far as the eye could see, an endless line of brick cottages and native stores, fenced in with barbed wire, a desolation of refuse, tin cans, dust, and sand.

Just outside the compound Winton was having a cottage for the compound manager constructed, entailing no great labor in a country where plastered interiors and heating are unnecessary and almost unknown. He pictured Daddy Seaton there—and Sheila. But Winton did not let his mind dwell on these dreams overmuch, for he was of a practical nature, and the work in hand engrossed him. Every moment of his day was occupied.

Winton appointed Ned Burns general overseer under him.

He was building a small brick structure for himself also. It was near the shack in which Burns lived, and was to serve for living quarters and for an office. The diamond, which had been restored by the police, with many apologies for the misunderstanding—though Winton knew the police had been quite aware of his identity and privy to De Witt's scheme—now rested in a safe inside.

This might have appeared rash to the uninitiated, but, while there was a good deal of buying of stones conveyed illicitly out of the compounds, there had never been the theft of a recorded stone, except for the pseudo-theft from the bank. Public opinion rendered such an act almost impossible. Diamonds were the one commodity that were safe from robbers in Malopo.

The machinery arrived as soon as the building was finished. Then followed a week of the hardest kind of work, at the end of which Winton had a clear idea of the process of diamond mining. All operations at Malopo were of a crude and primitive kind, even his own, since the grounds had not yet proved themselves sufficiently to justify the introduction of expensive apparatus.

In substance, the clay was simply dug up and sent to the surface in buckets, hoisted by whims, or vertical winches, consisting each of a drum rotating on a shaft, on which the hoisting rope wound. The material was then carried in large barrows to the distributing grounds where, after some disintegration had been effected by exposure to sun and air, it was crushed and fed into the washing troughs, in which the stones and heavy minerals were separated from the lighter deposits by revolving toothed arms. The refuse was then picked over by the natives in the compounds.

Winton entered into a contract with a local concern that controlled the water supply by means of shafts sunk into the river bed two or three miles outside the town. This was the most important feature of the working of the claim. Without water he would be unable to begin operations or to continue them.

At last, stopping to take breath, Winton found that nothing was needed for the beginning of the mining work except the arrival of the natives. Three gangs were expected, and might arrive any day.

He turned his thoughts again to Seaton. A compound manager was, of course, necessary for the overseeing of the workers, and he resolved to offer old Seaton the position which he had mentally reserved for him. Seaton was known as a man eminently qualified for the position, but owing to his habits none would employ him.

It was nearly three weeks since Winton had seen Sheila. He did not know for certain that the girl and her father were still in Malopo. He was thinking of inquiring for the old man when he was surprised by a visit from him at an early hour in the morning.

Daddy Seaton was wearing a new suit, he was perfectly sober, and looked almost respectable.

"Mr. Garrett, I don't suppose you'll know who I am," he began; "but everybody in Malopo knows me, and they'll tell you that there ain't a better workman than Stanford Seaton when he leaves liquor alone. That's been my bane—but, then, I've had a heap of trouble, sir."

"Looking for a job?" asked Winton.

"And employers fight shy of me because of my weakness," continued Seaton frankly, determined to put his story in his own way. "But I can say there isn't a man in Malopo understands the natives better. I heard you wanted a compound manager, and if you'll give me a chance you won't regret it. I shall never touch drink again. I've had enough of it, sir."

"I'll try you, Seaton," answered Winton. "Report for work tomorrow morning; and you can move into that cottage as soon as you like."

It was on the tip of his tongue to add "and your daughter." But Winton cautiously refrained. When he set about a thing he had all the method and prudence of his father, who had been a financial power in New York before a combine broke him. Winton was resolved either to win Sheila or to probe the situation and discover the secret of the girl's fascination over him.

His heart cried out for her, but his head warned him of his unwisdom. And Winton, like most men, was swayed by both; only with him they were in unusual equipoise.

He unlocked the cottage door and left Seaton inspecting the inside, returning to work in his office. About an hour later, seeing the cottage door wide open and supposing that Seaton had left the key in the lock, he went over to close the place. He looked inside and saw the old man lying upon the floor hopelessly drunk, an empty bottle of trade gin beside him.

Seaton had certainly not had the bottle about him when he arrived. There was only one place where he could have got it, and that was on the adjoining claim.

This was one of a block owned by the syndicate. It ran its own native store, which was in charge of a fellow named Kash, an Armenian, a little, blear-eyed, scoundrelly-looking marauder who, Ned Burns had said, made most of his revenue from the sale of liquor to the natives in defiance of the prohibitory law.

Saturday afternoon was a half holiday in the compounds, and at noon the gates were thrown open until midnight. As most of the natives were Bechuanas, the formal challenges, followed by murderous intertribal fights with knobkerries, which were a regular Saturday afternoon performance on the gold fields at Johannesburg, did not take place at Malopo. During the week-end, however, drunkenness and brawling were universal, the length of the reef was a scene of uproar and riot, to which nobody paid any attention, and the cause was the trade gin sold by every storekeeper. It was the current belief that the native could not be stopped from procuring liquor, and the syndicate winked at Kash's activities.

Winton had looked on the matter differently from the first. While determined to go slowly, the sight of Seaton, lying dead drunk upon the floor, roused him to furious anger. Burning with indignation, he crossed the syndicate claim and entered the store.

It was one of the filthiest places that Winton had ever seen. The front was hung with second-hand clothing and gaudy-colored blankets with lions and heads of women woven patchily into their surfaces. Canned foods, put up years previously and probably condemned, twists of tobacco, cheap sweets exposed to the innumerable flies, rolls of soiled calico in white and blue littered the shelves, with beads and imitation jewelry which the natives took home to adorn the wives bought with the earnings of their apprenticeship. Behind the counter stood Kash, blinking like an owl out of the darkness.

"You've been selling liquor to my compound manager," cried Winton angrily.

Kash flung up his hands in horror at the suggestion. "No, sair!" he protested. "I sell no drink to any one; Never, sair! I'm good merchant, honest merchant!"

He had just finished speaking when, before Winton could reply, a trap-door in the floor opened, and there emerged the head of a yellow Hottentot, and a hand wiping the mouth in evident satisfaction. As the man saw Winton his eyes rolled with fear. His head vanished and the trap-door fell with a clang.

Winton was upon the spot in an instant, pulled up the door, and saw beneath him a short flight of steps, leading into a tunnel dimly lit by a small electric bulb. As he ran down he heard the Armenian screaming wildly behind him. He reached the passage just as the light went out. An electric bell began ringing. There was a scurrying of feet at the end of the passage, where a faint gleam of daylight showed. When Winton reached it he saw a second flight of steps, and, ascending these, he found himself in the syndicate compound, with a gang of half a dozen natives flying before him in all directions.

(Continued next week).