

Diamonds of Malopo

By
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(Concluded.)

It was seconds before the distant thud of the body upon the rocks beneath the gorge told Winton that De Witt would trouble Sheila no more.

Winton reached the cave, stood up, and caught Sheila in his arms. She was fainting, her lips sought his own feebly; then her head dropped on his shoulder.

By the next flash of lightning Winton measured the gap. He could almost straddle it; could he, bearing Sheila, make the leap? He hesitated.

Then, with wild yells, the Hottentots, who had heard De Witt's cry, came swarming up toward the entrance of the cave.

Winton measured the distance with his eyes and leaped. It was a terrific jump for a man carrying an unconscious woman in his arms. He tottered upon the opposite edge, but did not fall. The Hottentots were just entering the cave. Winton, crouching behind the ledge, saw them stare about them in amazement.

He saw that the narrow orifice widened behind him into a larger cavern. An enormous boulder, hanging from the roof, poised like a rocking-stone upon a smaller one, partly concealed the approach. At once an idea born of his desperate situation, came to Winton. If he could dislodge the stone he could effectively bar the Hottentots from following him.

He set Sheila down and put his shoulder against the boulder. It stirred, it rocked, it resumed its position.

Another flash—and he was seen. Yelling, the Hottentots rushed forward. The foremost saw the chasm and hesitated.

Then Winton, putting forth all his strength, shifted the stone.

It fell, bringing down a shower of debris from the roof of the cave. Winton stumbled among the rattling stones, and, catching up Sheila, staggered along the passage. But he turned as the succession of thunderous crashes ceased, and waited for the next flash. None came, and he heard not the least sound from the Hottentots behind him.

After a full minute Winton struck a match. To his amazement he saw, by the little light, that the passage behind him was completely obliterated. The fall of the stone had brought down a miniature landslide. All traces of the entrance beneath the mountain had vanished. No light, no sound could penetrate.

Winton tried to strike another match. But the box was damp, and the slight flame fizzled out immediately. He tried another and another with like result.

He sat down quietly at Sheila's side. Later, he thought wearily, he would feel his way onward in the darkness. Now, worn out by the day and by his struggle, he had an intense desire to sleep.

He heard Sheila sigh and put his arms about her.

"We are safe, dearest!" he said, and tried to make his tone as hopeful



as one could who was trapped in the bowels of the earth.

She put her arms about him in a manner indicative of complete confidence. And, with Sheila beside him, Winton felt that nothing mattered.

He must have slept, for some time later, opening his eyes in incredulous self-distrust, he discovered a gleam of daylight far beneath him.

"Sheila!" he whispered. He felt her stir beside him. "Winton!" she murmured.

"Look!" he said pointing. Against the tiny patch of light he saw her face, and the look on it told him that, what he had hidden from her,

she had concealed from him.

"Sheila, you have slept?"

"Not very much, Winton, dear!"

"You knew our danger?"

"I had you, Winton," she answered with supreme confidence.

He raised her hands to his lips, awed by her courage and faith.

They began following the track down toward the patch of light. It was hardly more than an earth-hole in the mountain, but freedom was not far away. And at last they emerged upon the steep hillside and understood the nature of their location.

The whole of the mountain was honeycombed with fissures. In the course of ages, as these crumbled away, and the boulders above fell under the pressure of the whole mass, tunnels had been formed. The road which they had traversed had been actually a continuation of the pass at the end of the valley of bones, and had once been open to the sky.

But what gave Winton the greatest confidence was the discovery that this was the only pass through the solid mountain wall, which extended for several miles in either direction. To attack them the Hottentots would have to make almost a day's detour. And there was not the least likelihood that they would do this. They had nothing to gain by pursuing them, now that De Witt was dead.

The sun was rising when they reached the plains. The stony desert lay all about them, but they quenched their thirst at a pool formed by the rains in a hollow of the rocks, and set their faces resolutely in the direction of Malopo.

It was a fearful, thirsty journey that lay before them. There were five and thirty miles to cover, and their only hope of surviving it lay in the probability of rains that afternoon. The seasonal downpour now seemed well established. And because there was no alternative, they dismissed their fears and started.

There would be nothing to fear from the natives in the desert. However the rebellion might be faring, all the available warriors would either be mustered outside the town or, at the worst, would be in possession of it. As for the Hottentots, Winton and Sheila agreed that they would probably remain in the mountains, by the water, for an indefinite time, since all their instincts would lie in keeping out of the fighting.

"We shall meet nobody," said Winton as they started, "until we reach the river. Once there, we can reconnoiter and see how things are faring. I am confident that the tribesmen will have found a warm reception."

Yet this, his first prophecy, was wrong. For, where the last foothill faded into the blue, in a little dry gully, face down in the dry pit that he had scooped with his fingers, they found the skeleton of a man beside that of a horse. The fingers clutched a pocketbook.

Winton detached it from the dead man's grasp and opened it. Inside was a single envelope with a name on it. Within the envelope was a small stone.

The man had been Van Vorst. The pebble was the big diamond.

Winton sat down beside the skeleton, and his shattered nerves gave way at last. He burst into helpless laughter. The irony of the situation was too much for him.

The outburst calmed him. When he arose he felt as if the return of the stone obliterated all the past, ending the cycle of misfortune that had begun with the theft. He caught Sheila to him.

"We are going to begin now—begin to live," he said.

He read her acquiescence in her happy eyes.

"And I am going to have this cut and set for your engagement ring, even if it isn't ready before the wedding ring," added Winton.

After that they went on more briskly. Their hunger only made them more buoyant and resolved to reach their destination before their strength failed them. But as the day grew hotter and the sky remained cloudless their speed slackened. A natural reaction and depression came on them. They rested at noon and resumed their journey silently. There was no hope of getting near Malopo that day, even if they were keeping a fairly accurate course. Sheila, indeed, was the guide; Winton alone would have been helplessly lost in trying to follow the sun.

It was middle afternoon, and their thirst had grown almost unendurable. Still, they hoped. Rain would come, must come, by nightfall. The sun was half-way down in the west when suddenly Winton, lifting up his eyes, perceived a horseman approaching them.

He uttered a glad cry. For the rider was indubitably a white man, and he was riding in the white man's fashion, with toes turned in and a tight snaffle and loose curb.

That was where Winton made his second wrong guess that day. The man was not white but coal-black; he seemed to blacken the air around him within the distance of an aureole.

It was Sam.

He leaped from his saddle with a yell that would have done credit to any savage upon the fields, and, grasping Winton's hand, pumped it up and down violently.

"They're all out searching for you and Miss Sheila!" he cried. "Ned Burns and half Malopo. I took an idea that I'd strike off this way. I presume that was an inference from intuitive premises, Mr. Garrett? But, thank God, you are both safe!"

"How about Malopo?" shouted Winton.

"Safe and sound, sir. It seems there was a detachment of police with a couple of Maxims on the way up from

Vryburg before the row began. The government had been wider awake than we gave them credit for being. And those nigger-colored aboriginal Bantus—ran right into them. They didn't have much heart for fighting after they got a few rounds at five hundred yards. Malopo only lost seven men, and not a child or woman hurt. And the half that isn't out looking for you is putting the debris underground. And Mr. Garrett, Malopo's going to give you and Miss Sheila a triumphal procession, especially her—"

Winton's face grew grave. But a glance at Sheila made it change swiftly.

"We won't bear malice against Malopo—we can't now," he said softly; and Sheila agreed.

Then he grew very serious.

"We're about finished, Sam," he said.

"How far is Malopo?"

"Right over yonder," answered Sam.

"Not ten miles away. Miss Sheila can make it on my horse in an hour."

"Sam, I see you haven't a water bottle."

"Why, Mr. Garrett, we've got a packhorse with a water skin. If only I hadn't left the crowd! We might sight them on the way back, though and Miss Sheila is sure to come upon some of them—"

"If only we had something moist Sam," croaked Winton.

"Why, Mr. Garrett," exclaimed Sam.

"I never thought of it, but here's something I found growing in the desert. I picked two of them, and I think I'll take the seeds back and plant them. I'm glad I didn't eat both."

And from the other side of his saddle he detached a huge wild watermelon which he divided with his knife. He handed half to Sheila and the other half to Winton.

The fruit was insipid in flavor, but it tasted to the travelers like nectar.

Winton discarded the gnawed-out shell. "Sam," he said.

"Sir?"

"I hate to be personal, Sam, but really—"

"Pray don't mention it," answered Sam politely.

"How about those primeval instincts, Sam?"

[THE END]

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Here the stranger who had paused to listen remonstrated.

"But how could a person fall for three stories and not be hurt?" he sternly inquired.

"Well," replied the veteran, a twinkling gleam into his eye, "you've already fallen fer one, an' I guess fallin' fer two more won't hurt ye."—Everybody's Magazine.

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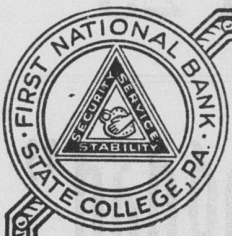
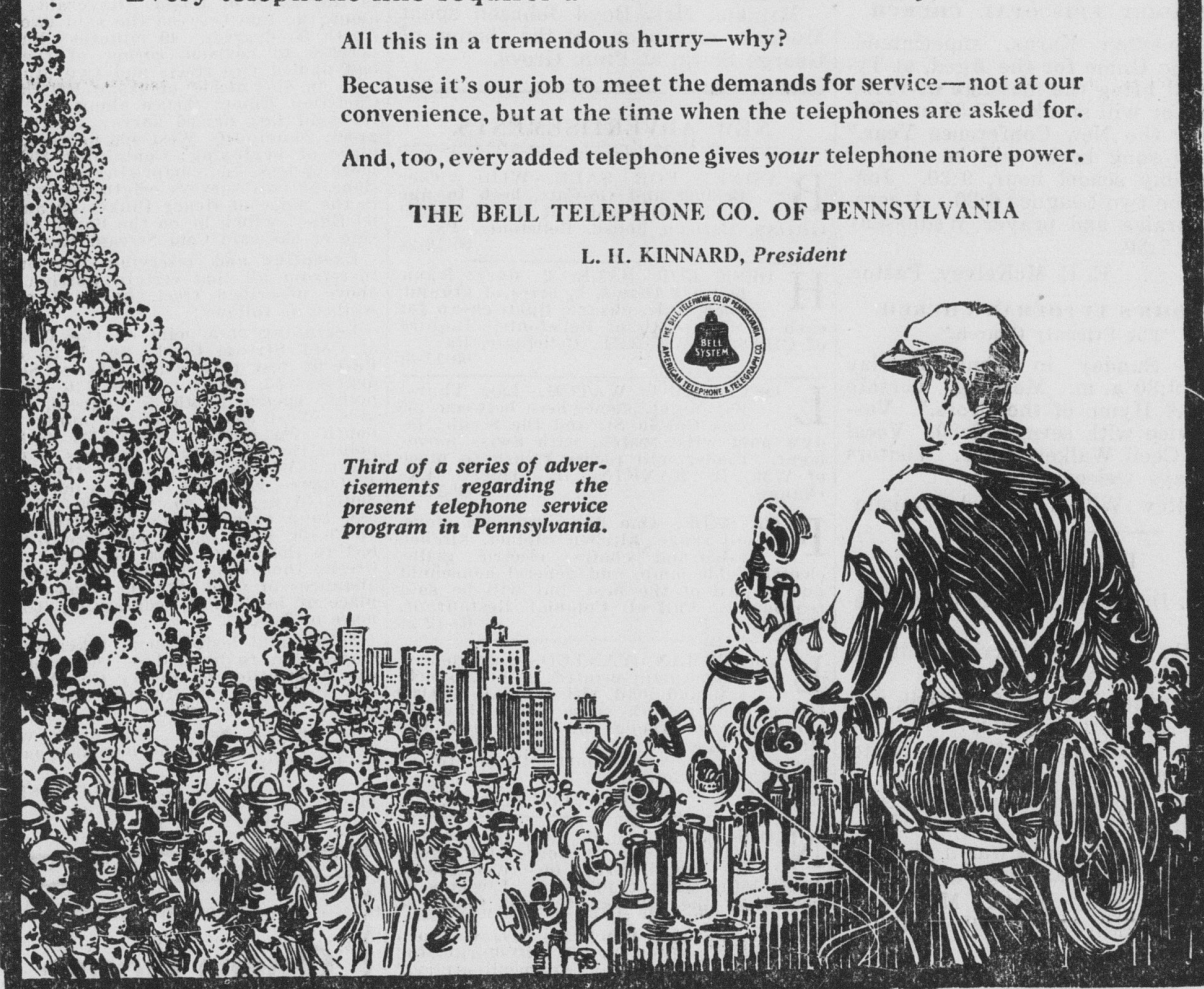
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