

## Mining the World's Diamonds

By W. G. Fitz-Gerald

A PROSPEROUS world expends every year \$25,000,000 in rough diamonds, and such of them as do not come from the mines of Kimberley may be considered a negligible quantity. That may not be the case for long, however, for the precious gems have been discovered recently in the Transvaal, and the finding a year or two ago of the famous "Cullinan" stone, which weighs over one pound avoirdupois, marks a record in the history of mineralogy.

Do not believe that romance is dead, for I will take you to an ugly little town of twenty-five thousand people that has grown up around four or five yawning holes in the earth. A very dreary town, this Kimberley, dumped on the desolate African veldt that produces not an ear of corn. Little better than a desert, in fact, where artificial irrigation is everywhere necessary.

The city's streets stretch like protecting arms around the precious caves which in a few years have yielded more than twelve tons weight of diamonds, valued at half a billion dollars! Look back on the story of this desert patch and you have a strange romance. It begins with two little bands of Boer emigrants fleeing out of Cape Colony a generation ago to escape British oppression. One of them by some strange fate settled on a patch of gold forty miles in extent which has since become the famous Rand, and yields a hundred million dollars every year in the precious metal.

On the other hand Burgher Jacobs off-saddled on a hundred acres of diamonds, and his little claim to-day contains an absolute monopoly of the world in these gems. His children used to play in the sand with bright pebbles for marbles. Neighbor Schalk Van Neikirk saw one of the stones, took it from the little ones with the remark that it might be valuable, and the following year it was on show at the Universal Exposition of Paris as a magnificent diamond of twenty-one carats.

Two years later old Van Neikirk himself picked out of the mud plaster of neighbor Du Toit's hut the famous "Star of Africa," which sold for \$56,000. That was the beginning of the diamond mines which to-day employ fifteen thousand Kaffirs and four thousand Europeans—"All this for the vanity of women," as Lord Randolph Churchill remarked, on his first visit to the diggings.

It seems ages since the Griqua native shepherds were seen wearing rough stones as charms worth \$100,000 each; yet in reality it is but very few years ago. Little wonder that before the De Beers era twelve thousand diggers swarmed along the magic banks of the Vaal, grovelling in gravel and locustine sand. The stuff would be dumped in heaps at the water's edge and washed in cradles over screens of various mesh.

Soon there were one thousand six hundred separate claim-holders in the Kimberley Mine alone; and the big pit showed weirdly with its cobweb of wires stretched at various angles from the lip of the precipice to the working-places of the busy bees below. Even in those days thousands of savages were employed, and their roaring war songs and strident laughter, with the incessant clatter of ever-running hide buckets, made up a hideous din.

The pits run in "tubes" or "funnels" many acres in extent, evidently forced up ages ago by volcanic action. At first a yellow ground was found, and men left the blue below this severely alone. But the era of open workings soon came to an end, although thousands of independent diggers made huge fortunes in a few months. To-day you will find depths of three thousand feet in the diamond mines, and the bottom of the blue funnel has not yet been reached. Both blue and yellow earths, which are studded with diamonds like a geological pudding, are supposed to be volcanic mud that has bubbled up through the action of subterranean heat of unthinkable degree.

Soon elaborate machinery took the place of the primitive gear, and after a long series of reckless disasters such as falls of rocks, floodings in the mine, and sinister rushes of mud, a regular system was adopted, and the Mining Board established. Then came an era of large companies whose competition brought about overproduction of the gems and much lowness of price. At this stage Cecil Rhodes came upon the scene, and with his colleagues secured entire control over the mines, drawing a check for more than \$25,000,000 for one claim. Any visitor to the De Beers' offices in London may see the original check for himself, duly framed and hung.

The mines were practically shut down after the amalgamation and no production allowed in order that the economic law of supply and demand should right itself. The largest stone from the Kimberley Mine was secured about this time and weighed 503 carats. It was imperfect, however, and only fetched \$60,000.

There are at present five magic caves: the De Beers, the Kimberley, the Bultfontein, Du Toit's Pan, and Wesselson. All these are within six miles of each other, a roaring hive of industry whose

mere machinery is worth over \$20,000,000. Each cave has above ground great compounds, where the working Kaffirs are practically imprisoned during their term of service. There are high walls and roof-nettings to prevent the inmates from tossing diamonds over to confederates outside, for the Kaffirs did a great trade in the old days throwing over tin cans containing fine stones to be picked up by wives or friends and sold for the benefit of the family. And to-day, in spite of the most perfect system of espionage that science can suggest, and with expert searchings three or four times a day, a traffic is done in illicit diamond-buying to the tune of \$4,000,000 a year. So complete is the monopoly in the world's diamonds, however, that the De Beers people themselves buy back these stones, in reality their own property.

The shortest period for which the Kaffirs contract to work is three months. The work of the underground drillers and blasters is extremely hard, for the famous "blue" in which the precious stones are embedded is as hard as rock, and many tons of dynamite have to be used, causing smoke almost poisonous.

Holes for blasting are first drilled and then the blasts are touched off. The crushed blue ground is conveyed to the mine shaft one thousand five hundred feet away from the tunnels. Here at the foot of the shaft the ore is dumped into buckets on wheels and swiftly drawn out of the mines by powerful engines. Then

you will see thousands of men, mostly negroes, earning \$1.25 a day perched upon the blue-ground rock in the tunnels, patiently drilling with hammer and chisel.

Great stretches of ground known as the "floors" are marked off like tennis courts to receive the precious ore; for air, rain, and sun will do the work of disintegration as no costly machinery could do it. One mine alone has five miles of dumping floors. Upon their smooth surface is spread the "blue" to the depth of a foot, and after several months it crumbles and releases the indestructible crystals within, such as diamonds, garnets, olivines and other stones of lesser value, usually found associated with the most precious of all gems.

The disintegration process is helped by harrowing with steam plows; and all such ground as remains obdurate goes into the crushing machine to be pulverized. The vast washing-gear is a marvel of ingenuity; and as the dirt and gravel pass down its plane the diamonds are arrested by a tallowy coating. This fat is then scraped off and melted in a caldron, in whose bottom the diamonds are found like precious grounds in a gigantic coffee-cup.

They are taken from here to the general offices of the monopoly and sorted according to value and size. Stones worth \$200,000 have been washed in a single day. But even the waste earth is not yet done with. This is specially treated lest tallow and machinery alike

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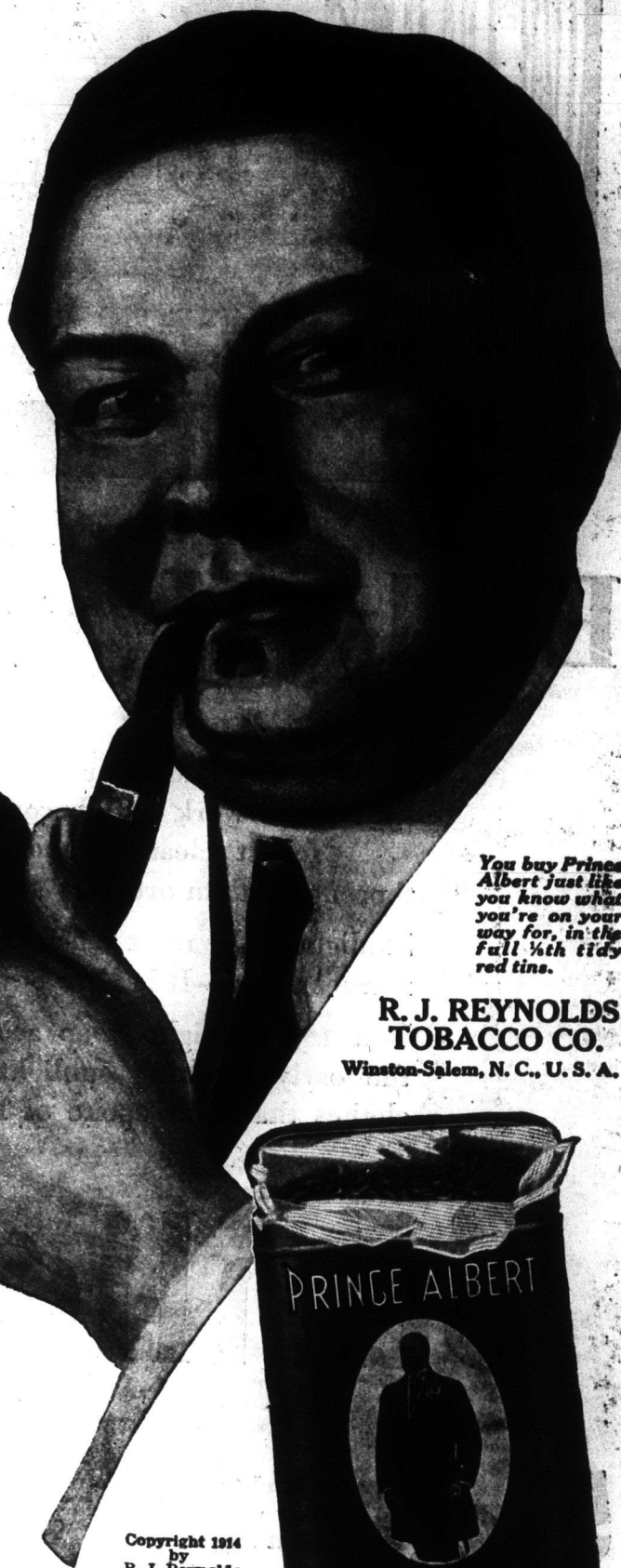


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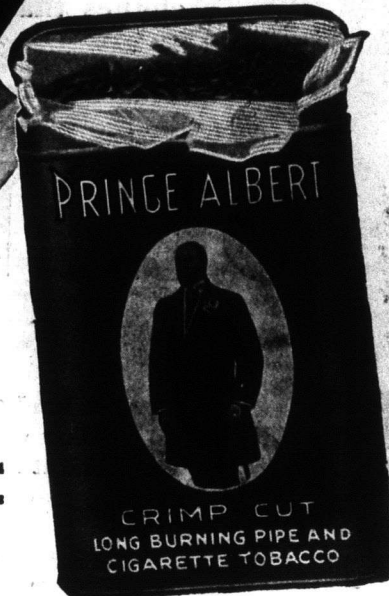
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