

Diamonds are a girl's best friend, and the egg-sized ruby bestowed on his new wife by Aristotle Onassis has put those blood-red stones, the rarest of all gems, very much back in vogue. But the newest item in the gem world is a precious stone that precious few people have even seen. It is a sapphire-like gem called Tanzanite, which was discovered in 1967 in East Africa.

Until the past year, little was known of Tanzanite. Among the first to realize its value was a Goanese prospector named Manuel de Souza, who stumbled across a pocket of crystals in Tanzania in the summer of 1967. Samples were sent for appraisal to German lapidaries, who recognized the stones' potential for use in jewelry. Other prospectors dug in, and the area of that first find is now pockmarked with holes. "It is all rather like the Klondike," says Dr. John M. Saul, a New York geologist with three claims in the area.

The local crime rate has risen steeply, reports Saul, and "there's a great deal of dirty work, with shifting or substituting claim pegs." De Souza and his four sons now stand guard over their claims with shotguns. Tanzanian officials, who have been attempting to control the export of the gems, say that until three months ago no Tanzanite had left the country legally—a clear hint that many of the stones now in Europe or the U.S. were smuggled out.

Flashes of Purple. It is Tanzanite's uncanny visual resemblance to the sapphire, the second-biggest seller (after the diamond) among precious stones, that made a gemologist at Manhattan's Tiffany & Company hail its discovery as "the most exciting event of the century." Although it actually is a three-colored stone that shows flashes of purple and green, its predominant color is a deep royal blue. Since "blue is the most popular color in gems," according to Henry B. Platt, vice president and director of Tiffany's and the man who gave Tanzanite its name, the potential market for the stone is huge. It is hardly diminished by the fact that Tanzanites, because they are softer and somewhat less refractive than sapphires, are also less expensive: they retail for a maximum of \$400 a carat, compared with as much as \$2,500 a carat for top-quality Burmese or Kashmirian sapphires. Tiffany's, which now has some 60 Tanzanites in its vault, currently is the only U.S. jeweler with any substantial supply. Most of the gems are still unmounted, and Tiffany's is not selling the loose stones. The biggest sale so far: a brooch containing an 84-carat, square-shaped Tanzanite surrounded by diamonds. The price and purchaser are Tiffany secrets. Says Platt: "She is a very discerning collector of fine jewelry, so we can rest happy in the knowledge that our stone has found a good home." Wherever it is.