

the discovery was made he was down with fever," he added.

"And he knew nothing?"

"Nothing."

Amber opened his hand and allowed the four pebbles to slip on to the table.

"And yet he had these," he said.

"What are they to do with it?" asked Whitey.

Amber smiled.

"Nothing," he said, "except that these are diamonds."

CHAPTER XV.

In the Bed of the River.

IT was a fortunate circumstance that within three days two homeward bound ships called at the little coast town where the Commissioner for the Alebi district made his headquarters. Fortunate, for it allowed Lambaire and Whitey to travel homeward by one ship, and Cynthia Sutton by the other. Amber went to the beach where the heavy surf boat waited—to see her off.

"I ought to be taking my ticket with you," he said, "or better still follow you secretly, so that when you sit down to dinner to-night—enter Amber in full kit, surprise of lady—curtain."

She stood watching him curiously. The heat of the coast had made her face whiter and finer drawn. She was in Amber's eyes the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Though he could jest, his heart was heavy enough for tears.

"I wish you would come," she said simply, and he knew her heart at that moment.

"I'll stay." He took her hand in both of his. "There's a chance, though it is a faint one, that your brother is alive. Sanders says there is no doubt that those men left him to die—there is no proof that he is dead. I shall stay long enough to convince myself one way or the other."

The boat was ready now, and Amber was discretely watching the steamer that lay anchored a mile from shore in four fathoms of water.

"Au revoir," she said, and her lip trembled.

Amber held out his arms to her, and she came to him without fear. He held her tight for the space of a few seconds, and she lifted her face to his.

"Au revoir, my love," he whispered, and kissed her lips.

* * *

Amber left the next morning for the Alebi, and with him went Abiboo, a taciturn sergeant of Houssas and Sanders' right-hand man.

It was a conventional African journey into the bush.

The monotony of hot marches by day, of breathless humming nights, of village palavers, of sudden tropical storms where low lying yellow clouds came tumbling and swirling across the swaying treetops, and vivid lightnings flickered incessantly through the blue-dark forest.

The party followed the beaten track which led from village to village, and at each little community inquiries were made, but no white man had been seen since Lambaire and Whitey had passed.

On the twenty-eighth day of the march, the expedition reached the place where Lambaire had said Sutton died. Here, in accordance with his plans Amber established something of a permanent camp.

Accompanied by Abiboo he inspected the spot where the handkerchief and diamonds had been found and the depression where the "grave" had been located.

"Master," said Abiboo, "it was here that a hole had been dug."

"I see no hole," said Amber. He spoke in Arabic: there was a time when Captain Ambrose Grey had been a secretary of legation, and his knowledge of Arabic was a working one.

An examination of the ground showed the depression to be the dried bed of a watercourse. Amber explored it for a mile in either direction without discovering any sign of the opening which Abiboo had led him to expect. In some places it was overgrown with a thick tangle of

elephant grass and a variety of wild bramble which is found in African forests.

"Water has been here," said Abiboo, "but cala cala," which means long ago.

The fact that the grave had disappeared proved nothing. The heavy rains which they had experienced on the march would have been sufficient to wash down the debris and the loose earth which had stood about the hole.

For three weeks Amber pursued his investigations. From the camp he sent messengers to every village within a radius of fifty miles, without finding any trace of Sutton.

Regretfully he decided to give up the search; two of his carriers had gone down with beri-beri, and the rainy season was getting nearer and nearer. Worse than this the Isisi—Alebi folk—were restless. He had had advice of crucifixions and dances, and Sanders had sent him six more soldiers to strengthen his escort.

The occasional storms had been followed by irregular downpours, and he himself had had an attack of fever.

"I will stay two more days," he told Abiboo, "if by then I find nothing, we strike camp."

That night, as he sat in his tent writing a letter to Cynthia, there came a summons from Abiboo.

"Master," said the Houssa, "one of my men has heard a shot."

Amber slipped on his jacket and stepped out of the tent.

"Where—in what direction?" he asked. It was pitch dark, and a gentle drizzle of rain was falling.

"Towards the east," said the native.

Amber returned to the tent for his electric lamp and together they stood listening.

Far away they heard a noise like that made by a cat in pain; the long howls came faintly in their direction.

"That is a wounded leopard," said Abiboo. Amber was thinking rapidly. Save for the gentle murmur of rain there was no sound in the forest. It was certainly not the night for a leopard to advertise his presence.

"If there is a white man in the forest," said Amber, "he would come for this." He slipped his revolver from his pocket and fired two shots in the air. He waited, but there came no answer. At intervals of half a minute he emptied the chambers of the weapon without eliciting any reply.

For the greater part of an hour Amber remained listening. The cries of the leopard—if leopard it was—had died down to a whimper and had ceased. There was nothing to be gained by a search that night but as soon as daylight came, Amber moved out with two Houssa guards and Abiboo.

It was no light task the party had set itself, to beat six square miles of forest, where sapling and tree were laced together with rope upon rope of vegetation. It was well into the afternoon when Abiboo found the spoor of a wild beast.

Following it they came to flecks of dried blood. It might have been—as Amber realized—the blood of an animal, wounded by another. Half an hour's trailing brought them to a little clearing, where stretched at the foot of a tree lay the leopard, dead and stiff.

"H'm," said Amber, and walked up to it. There was no sign of the laceration which marks the beast wounded in fight.

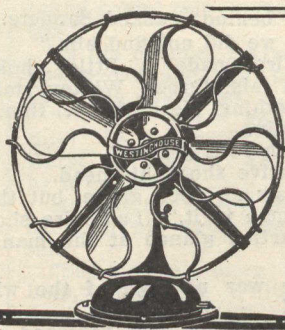
"Turn it over."

The men obeyed, and Amber whistled. There was an indisputable bullet wound behind the left shoulder.

Amber knelt down, and with his hunting knife cut down in search of the bullet. He found it after a long search and brought it to light. It was a flattened Webley revolver bullet. He went back to camp in a thoughtful mood that night.

If it was Sutton's revolver, where was Sutton? Why did he hide himself in the forest? He had other problems to settle to his satisfaction, but these two were uppermost in his mind.

The day had been a fine one, and the customary storm had not eventuated. A beautiful moonlight night had followed the most glorious of sunsets. It was such a night as only



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