



THE RIVER OF STARS

By EDGAR WALLACE

A NEW SERIAL STORY

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

The preface and chapters one and two introduce several characters: Sutton, an explorer; Commissioner Sanders, of Central West Africa, the witch-doctor of the Alebi country, and Amber, the mysterious and educated gaol-bird. Then come Lambaire and Whitey, the arch conspirators who had sent Sutton, with a false compass, to find a diamond mine. And old Peter Musk, friend to Amber, and a slave to yellow romance. Finally comes Sutton, the younger, whose father had discovered the diamond mine but had lost himself in the doing.

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

YET Lambaire was not the type of enthusiast who floats diamond mines on no more solid basis than his optimism. To be perfectly candid, the Great Forest Diamond Mining Company had come into existence at a period when his cash balance was extremely low; for all the multiplicity of his interests, such periods of depression came to him. It may be said of him, as it was said, that he did not go to allotment until he realized that there was some doubt about the possibility of ever discovering this mine of his.

That it was a dream mine, the merest rumour of an Eldorado, unconfirmed save by the ravings of a dying man, and a chart which he did not possess, and by no means could secure, he did not admit in the florid little prospectus which was distributed privately, but thoroughly, to the easy investors of Britain. Rather he suggested that the mine was located and its rights acquired. The prospectus had dealt vaguely with "certain difficulties of transport which the company would overcome," and at the end came a learned and technical report from the "resident engineer" (no name), who spoke of garnets, and "pipes," and contained all the conversational terminology of such reports.

No attempt need be made to disguise the fact that Lambaire was without scruple. Few men are wholly bad, but, reading his record, one is inclined to the judgment that such good seed as humanity had implanted within him never germinated.

He had descended to the little vestibule of the building, and was stepping into the street without, when a taxi-cab drove up and deposited the dapper Whitey.

"I want you," he piped.

Lambaire frowned.

"I haven't any time—" he began.

"Come back," urged Whitey, catching his arm, "come back into the office; I've got something important to say to you."

Reluctantly the big man retraced his steps.

Mr. Secretary Grene had a narrow shave, for he was examining a private drawer of his employers when the footsteps of the men sounded in the stone-flagged corridor without.

With an agility and deftness that would have delighted Lambaire, had these qualities been exercised on his behalf, instead of being to his detriment, the secretary closed and locked the drawer in one motion, slipped the key into his pocket, and was busily engaged in reading his notes when the two entered.

"YOU can go, Grene," said Lambaire. "I have a little business to transact with Mr. White—have your lunch and come back in half an hour."

When the door had closed on the secretary, Lambaire turned to the other.

"Well?" he demanded.

Whitey had taken the most com-

fortable chair in the room, and had crossed his elegantly-cased legs. He had the pleasant air of one who by reason of superior knowledge was master of the situation.

"When you have finished looking like a smirking jackass, perhaps you will tell me why you have made me postpone my lunch," said Lambaire unpleasantly.

Whitey's legs uncurled, and he sat up.

"This is news, Lambaire," his impressive hand upraised emphasized the importance of the communication he had to convey.

"It's an idea, and news together," he said. "I've seen the Suttons."

Lambaire nodded. The audacity of Whitey was a constant surprise to him, but it was the big man's practice never to betray that surprise.

Whitey was obviously disappointed that his great tidings had fallen so flat.

"You take a dashed lot for granted," he grumbled. "I've seen the Suttons, Lambaire—seen 'em after the affair at the Whistlers; it wanted a bit of doing."

"You're a good chap, Whitey," soothed Lambaire, "a wonderful chap; well?"

"Well," said the ruffled man in the chair, "I had a talk with the boy—very sulky, very sulky, Lambaire; huffy, didn't want to have any truck with me; and his sister—phew!"

HE raised his two hands, palms outwards, as he recalled the trying interview.

"She gave me the Ice," he said earnestly, "she was Cold—she was Zero; Lambaire, talking to her was like sitting in a draught! Br-r!"

He shivered.

"Well, what about the boy?"

Whitey smiled slyly.

"Huffy, haughty, go to—you know where—but reasonable. He's got the hang of the Whistler. It was like catching a kicked cat to get him back. He put on his dam' Oxford and Eton dressing—haw—haw!—you know the voice. Awful sorry, but the acquaintance had better drop—he'd made a mistake; no thank you, let the matter drop; good morning, mind the step."

Whitey was an indifferent mimic, but he conveyed the sense of the interview. "But he couldn't shake me—I was a sticker, I was the boy on the burning deck; he opened the door for me to go out, and I admired his geraniums; he rang the bell for a servant, and I said I didn't mind if I did; he fumed and fretted, walked up and down the room with his hands in his pockets; he told me what he thought of me and what he thought of you."

"What does he think of me?" said Lambaire quickly.

"I'd rather not say," said Whitey, "you'd be flattered—I don't think. He thinks you are a gentleman—no! Don't mind about a trifle like that. I sat down and argued with him. He said you were evidently the worst kind of waster."

"What did you say to that?" demanded Lambaire with a frown.

"I denied that," said Whitey virtuously; "not the worst kind, I said; any way, the interview ended by his promising to come up here this afternoon."

Lambaire paced the room in thought.

"What good will that do?" he asked.

Whitey raised imploring eyes to heaven.

"Hear me," he said, addressing an invisible deity. "Hark to him. I spend all the morning working for him, and he wants to know what is the good." He got up slowly and polished his hat with his sleeve.

"Here, don't go," said Lambaire, "I want to know a lot more. Now what is he prepared to do?"

"Look here, Lambaire." Whitey dropped all pretence at deference and geniality, and turned on the other with a snarl. "This kid can get at the chart. This diamond mine of ours has got to be more tangible than it is at present or there is going to be trouble; things are going rotten, and you know it."

"And suppose he won't part with it?"

"It is not a question of his parting with it," said Whitey; "he hasn't got it; it is his sister who has it. He's his father's son, you've got to remember that. You can bet that somewhere, tucked away out of sight inside him, he's got the old adventure blood; these sort of things don't die out. Look at me; my father was a—"

"Don't get off the subject," said Lambaire impatiently. "What are you driving at, Whitey? What does it matter to me whether he's got adventure blood, or lunatic blood, or any other kind of blood—he's got the chart that his father made, that was found on him when he died and was sent to the daughter by some fool of a Commissioner—eh? That's what we want!"

He rose jerkily, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and peeked his head forward, a mannerism of his when he was excited.

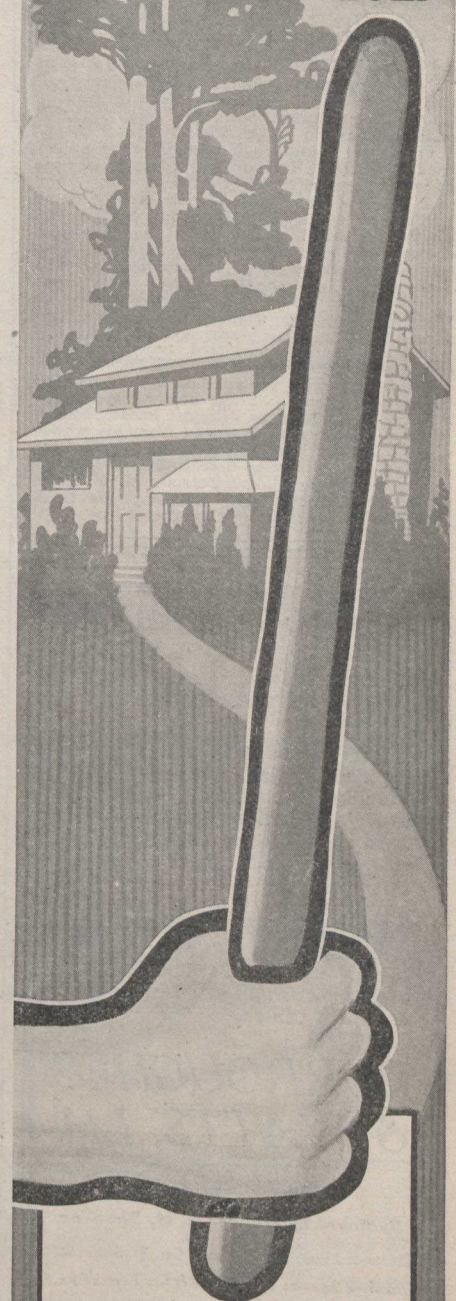
Though nominally Whitey was Lambaire's jackal, general man of affairs and dependant, it was easy to see that the big man stood in some fear of his servant, and that there were moments when Whitey took charge and was not to be lightly ignored. Now it was that he was the bully, and overbearing, masterful director of things. With his high thin voice, his vehemence as he hissed and spluttered, he was a little uncanny, terrifying. He possessed a curious vocabulary, and strangely unfamiliar figures of speech. To illustrate his meaning he brought vivid if incongruous picture words to his aid. Sometimes they were undisguised slang words, culled from other lands—Whitey was something of a traveler and had cosmopolitan tastes.

"YOU'RE a Shining Red Light, Lambaire," he continued in a fury. "People are crossing the Road; the Diamond business has got to be settled at once. Let people get busy, and they won't be content with finding out that the mine is minus; they'll want to know about the silver business and the printing business, and they'll put two and two together—d'ye see that? You was a fool ever to tackle the diamond game. It was the only straight deal you was ever in, but you didn't work it straight. If you had, you'd have got Sutton back alive; but no, you must have a funny compass, so that he could find the mine and make a chart of the road and only you could find it! Oh, you're a Hog of Cleverness, but you've overdone it!"

He grew a little calmer.

"Now look here," he went on, "young Sutton's coming to-day, and you've got to be Amiable; you've got to be Honest; you've got to be Engaging; you've got to Up and say—"

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