

search for the river had come to: this was the end of four months' wandering, every day taking them further and further into the bush; every week snapped one link that held them to civilization. They had not reached the Portuguese border, because, long before they had arrived within a hundred miles of the frontier, it was apparent that the map was all wrong. There had been little villages marked upon it which they had not come by: once when a village had been traced, and a tribal headquarters located, they had discovered, as other African travellers had discovered, that a score of villages bearing the same name might be found within a radius of a hundred miles.

And all the time the little party, with its rapidly diminishing band of carriers, was getting further and further into the bush. They had parlayed with the Alebi folk, fought a running fight with the bush people of the middle forest, held their camp against a three day attack of the painted K'hassi, and had reached the dubious security which the broken-spirited slave people of the Inner Lands could offer.

And the end of it was that the expedition must turn back, passing through the outraged territories they had forced.

"There is no other way," persisted Lambaire. Whitey shook his head.

A singularly futile ending to a great expedition. I am following the train of thought in Sutton's mind as he gloomed at the river flowing slowly past. Not the way which such expeditions ended in books. Cynthia would laugh, he shuddered. Perhaps she would cry, and have cause more-over.

And that thief man, Amber; a rum name, Amber—gold, diamonds. No diamonds, no River of Stars: the dream had faded. This was a river. It slugged a way through a cannibal land, it passed over hundreds of miles of cataracts and came to the sea . . . where there were ships that carried one to England . . . to London.

He sprang up. "When shall we start?" he asked humbly.

"Start?" Lambaire looked up. "We've got to go back the way we came," said the boy. "We might as well make a start now—the carriers are going—two went last night. We've no white man's food; we've about a hundred rounds of ammunition apiece."

"I suppose we can start to-morrow," he said listlessly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before the sun came up, a little expedition began its weary march coastward.

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For three days they moved without opposition; on the fourth day they came upon a hunting regiment of the K'hassi—an ominous portent, for they had hoped to get through the K'hassi country without any serious fighting. The hunting regiment abandoned its search for elephant and took upon itself the more joyous task of hunting men.

Fortunately the little party struck the open plain which lies to the westward of the Khassi land proper, and in the open they held the hunting regiment at bay. On the fifth day their headman, marching at the rear of the sweating carriers, suddenly burst into wild and discordant song. Sutton and Whitey went back to discover the reason for the outburst, and the man with a chuckle told them that he had seen several devils. That night the headman took a billet of wood, and creeping stealthily upon a carrier with whom he had been on perfectly friendly terms, smashed his skull.

"It is sleeping sickness," said Sutton.

The three white men were gathered near the tree to which the mad headman was bound—not without a few minor casualties among the carriers.

"What can we do?" fretted Lambaire. "We can't leave him—he would starve, or he might get free—that's worse."

Eventually they let the problem stand over till the morning, setting a guard to watch the lunatic.

The carriers were assembled in the morning under a new headman, and

the caravan marched, Whitey remaining behind. Lambaire, marching in the centre of the column, heard the sharp explosion of a revolver, and then after a pause another. He shuddered and wiped his moist forehead with the back of his hand.

Soon Whitey caught up with the party—Whitey, pallid of face, with his mouth trembling.

Lambaire looked at him fearfully. "What did you do?" he whispered.

"Go on, go on," snarled the other. "You are too questioning, Lambaire, you know damn'd well what I have done. Can't leave a nigger to starve to death—hey? Got to do something?" His voice rose to a shrill scream, and Lambaire, shaking his head helplessly, asked no more.

In romances your rascal is so thorough paced a rascal that no good may be said of him, no meritorious achievement can stand to his credit. In real life great villains can be heroic. Lambaire was naturally a coward—he was all the greater hero that he endured the rigours of that march and faced the dangers which every new day brought forth, uncomplainingly.

They had entered the Alebi country on the last long stage of the journey, when the great thought came to Lambaire. He confided to nobody, but allowed the matter to turn over in his mind two whole days.

They came upon a native village, the inhabitants of which were friendly disposed to the strange white men, and here they rested their weary bodies for the space of three days.

On the evening of the second day, as they sat before a blazing fire—for the night air had a nip even in equatorial Africa—Lambaire spoke his mind.

"Does it occur to you fellows what we are marching towards?" he asked. Neither answered him. Sutton took a listless interest in the conversation, but the eyes of Whitey narrowed watchfully.

"We are marching to the devil," said Lambaire, impressively. "I am marching to the bankruptcy court, and so are you, Whitey. Sutton is marching to something that will make him the laughing stock of London; and," he added slowly, watching the effect of his words, "that will make his father's name ridiculous."

He saw the boy wince, and went on—

"Me and Whitey floated a company—got money out of the public—diamond mine—brilliant prospects and all that sort of thing—see?"

He caught Whitey nodding his head thoughtfully, and saw the puzzled interest in Sutton's face.

"We are going back—"

"If we get back," murmured Whitey.

"Don't talk like a fool," snapped Lambaire. "My God, you make me sick, Whitey; you spoil everything! Get back! Of course we will get back—the worst of the fighting is over. It's marchin' now—we are in reach of civilization—"

"Go on—go on," said Whitey impatiently, "when we get back?"

"When we do," said Lambaire, "we've got to say, 'Look here, you people—the fact of it is—'"

"Making a clean breast of the matter," murmured Whitey.

"Making a clean breast of the matter—there's no mine."

Lambaire paused, as much to allow the significance of the situation to sink into his own mind as into the minds of the hearers.

"Well?" asked Whitey.

"Well," repeated the other, "why should we? Look here!"—he leant forward and spoke rapid'y and with great earnestness—"what's to prevent our saying that we have located the diamond patch, eh? We can cut out the river—make it a dried river bed—we have seen hundreds of places where there are rivers in the wet season. Suppose we get back safe and sound without pockets full of garnets and uncut diamonds—I can get 'em in London—"

Whitey's eyes were dancing now; no need to ask him how the ingenious plan appealed to him. But Sutton questioned.

(To be continued.)



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