

# The River of Stars

A New Serial

By EDGAR WALLACE

SINCE the best works of Rider Haggard, there has appeared no story of the African Outposts of British Dominion at once so colourful, adventurous and subtle in treatment as "The River of Stars." In this story Edgar Wallace adds the colour of Haggard to the finesse of Conan Doyle and Gaboriau, with a fine breadth of imagination and remarkable restraint in handling.

## 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.

## CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

"WELL put him right in a minute, won't we, Major?"

Whitey had a high little voice and spoke rapidly.

"Take his arm, Whitey," said Lambaire, "a couple of old brandies will make a new man of you. . ."

They disappeared through the swing doors of the club, and the hum of the departing taxi sounded fainter and fainter.

The street was almost deserted for a few minutes, then round the corner from St. James's Square came a motor-car. This driver also knew little of the locality, for he slowed down and came crawling along the street, peering at such numbers as were visible. He stopped before No. 46 with a jerk, jumped down from his seat and opened the door.

"This is the place, miss," he said respectfully, and a girl stepped out. She was very young and very pretty. She had evidently been spending the evening at a theatre, for she was dressed in evening finery, and over her bare shoulders an opera wrap was thrown.

She hesitated a moment, then ascended the two steps that led to the club, and hesitated again.

Then she came back to the car.

"Shall I ask, miss?"

"If you please, John."

She stood on the pavement watching the driver as he knocked on the glass-panelled door.

A servant came and held the door open, regarding the chauffeur with an unfriendly eye.

"Mr. Sutton—no, we've no such member."

"Tell him he's here as a guest," said the girl, and the waiter, looking over the head of the chauffeur, saw her and frowned.

"He's not here, madame," he said.

She came forward.

"He is here—I know he is here." Her voice was calm, yet she evidently laboured under some excitement. "You must tell him I want him—at once."

"He is not here, madame," said the man doggedly.

THERE was a spectator to the scene. He had strolled leisurely along, and had come to a standstill in the shadow of the electric brougham.

"He is here!" She stamped her foot. "In this wretched, wicked club—he is being robbed—it is wicked—wicked!"

The waiter colsed the door in her face. "Pardon me."

A young man, clean shaven, glass in eye, dressed in the neatest of tweed suits, stood by her, hat in hand.

He had the happiest of smiles and a half-smoked cigarette lay on the pavement.

"Can I be of any assistance?"

His manner was perfect, respect, deference, apology, all were suggested by his attitude, and the girl in her distress forgot to be afraid of this providential stranger.

"My brother—he is there." She pointed a shaky finger at the bland door of the club. "He is in bad hands—I have tried. . . ." Her voice failed her and her eyes were full of tears.

Amber nodded courteously. Without a word he led the way to the car, and she followed without question. She stepped in as he indicated.

"What is your address?—I will bring your brother."

With a hand that trembled, she opened a little bag of golden tissue that hung at her wrist, opened a tiny case and extracted a card.

He took it, read it, and bowed slightly. "Home," he said to the driver, and stood watching the tail lights of the brougham disappear.

He waited, thinking deeply.

This little adventure was after his own heart. He had been the happiest man in London that day, and was on his way back to the modest Bloomsbury bed-sitting-room he had hired, when fortune directed his footsteps in the direction of Curefax Street.

He saw the car vanish from sight round a corner, and went slowly up the steps of the club.

He pushed open the door, walked into the little hall-way, nodding carelessly to a stout porter who sat in a little box near the foot of the stairs.

The man looked at him doubtfully.

"Member, sir?" he asked, and was rewarded by an indignant stare.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the abashed porter. "We've got so many members that it is difficult to remember them."

"I suppose so," said Amber coldly. He mounted the stairs with slow steps; half-way up he turned.

"Is Captain Lawn in the club?"

"No, sir," said the man.

"Or Mr. Augustus Breet?"

"No, sir, neither of those gentlemen are in."

AMBER continued on his way.

That he had never heard of either, but that he knew both were out, is a tribute to his powers of observation. There was a rack in the hall where letters were displayed for members, and he had taken a brief survey of the board as he passed. Had there been any necessity, he could have mentioned half a dozen other members, but the porter's suspicions were lulled.

The first floor was taken up with dining and writing rooms.

Amber smiled internally.

"This," he thought, "is where the gulls sign their little cheques—most thoughtful arrangement."

He mounted another flight of stairs, walked into a smoking-room where a number of flashily-dressed men were sitting, met their inquiring gaze with a nod and a smile directed at an occupied corner of the room, closed the door, and went up yet another and a steeper flight.

Before the polished portals of the room, which he gathered was the front room of the upper floor, a man sat on guard.

He was short and broad, his face was unmistakably that of a prizefighter's, and he rose and confronted Amber.

"Well, sir?"

The tone was uncompromisingly hostile.

"All right," said Amber, and made to open the door.

"One moment, sir, you're not a member."

Amber stared at the man.

"My fellow," he said stiffly, "you have a bad memory for faces."

"I don't remember yours, anyway."

The man's tone was insolent, and Amber saw the end of his enterprise before ever it had begun.

He thrust his hands into his pockets and laughed quietly.

"I am going into that room," he said.

"You're not."

Amber reached out his hand and grasped the knob of the door, and the

man gripped him by the shoulder.

Only for a second, for the intruder whipped round like a flash.

The doorkeeper saw the blow coming and released his hold to throw up a quick and scientific guard—but too late. A hard fist, driven as by an arm of steel, caught him under the point of the jaw and he fell back, missed his balance, and went crashing down the steep stairs—for this was the top flight and conveniently ladder-like.

Amber turned the door handle and went in.

THE players were on their feet with eyes fixed on the door; the crash of the janitor's body as it struck the stairs had brought them up. There had been no time to hide the evidence of play, and cards were scattered about the floor and on the tables, money and counters lay in confusion. . . .

For a moment they looked at one another, the calm man in the doorway and the scowling players at the tables. Then he closed the door softly behind him and came in. He looked round deliberately for a place to hang his hat.

Before they could question him the door-keeper was back, his coat off, the light of battle in his eye.

"Where is he?" he roared. "I'll learn him. . . ."

His language was violent, but justified in the circumstances.

"Gentlemen," said Amber, standing with his back to the wall, "you can have a rough house, and the police in, or you can allow me to stay."

"Put him out!"

Lambaire was in authority there. His face was puckered and creased with anger, and he pointed to the trespasser.

"Put him out, George—"

Amber's hands were in his pockets.

"I shall shoot," he said quietly, and there was a silence and a move backward.

Even the pugilistic janitor hesitated.

"I have come for a quiet evening's amusement," Amber went on. "I'm an old member of the club, and I'm treated like a split\*; most unfriendly."

He shook his head reprovingly.

His eyes were wandering from face to face; he knew many who were there, though they might not know him. He saw the boy, white of face, limp, and half asleep, sprawling in a chair at Lambaire's table.

"Sutton," he said loudly, "Sutton, my buck, wake up and identify your old friend."

Gradually the excitement was wearing down. Lambaire jerked his head to the door-keeper and reluctantly he retired.

"We don't want any fuss," said the big man; he scowled at the imperturbable stranger. "We don't know you; you've forced your way in here, and if you're a gentleman you'll retire."

"I'm not a gentleman," said Amber calmly, "I'm one of yourselves."

He made his way to where the youth half sat, half lay, and shook him.

"I came to see my friend," he said, and a jolly nice mess some of you people have made of him."

He turned a stern face to the crowd.

"I'm going to take him away," he said suddenly.

His strength was surprising, for with one arm he lifted the boy to his feet. "Stop!"

Lambaire was between him and the door.

"You leave that young fellow here—and clear."

\* Thieves' argot for "detective."



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