

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. Lambaire promotes a pseudo-diamond mine. He proposes that Sutton the younger should go out to it. This the boy agrees to do, though against his sister's advice. Amber discovers that Lambaire and Whitey have been in the "coining" game. He burgles Lambaire's office, and removes two of the plates used for issuing false notes. Then he goes to Scotland Yard, and showing the plates to a "chief" there offers to find the gang, but the Chief refuses to make an old lag into a detective.

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

THEY looked at each other for a space of time, then the lines about the inspector's eyes creased and puckered, and he burst into a roar of laughter.

"My Chief Detective Inspector," said Amber reproachfully, "you hurt me."

But Amber's plaintive protest did not restore the detective's gravity. He laughed until the tears streamed down his face, and Amber watched him keenly.

"Oh dear!" gasped the detective, wiping his eyes. "You're an amusing devil—here." He got up, took a bunch of bright keys from his pocket and opened a cupboard in the wall. From a drawer he took a sheet of foolscap paper, laid it on his desk and sat down. "Your convictions!" he scoffed.

The paper was ruled exactly down the centre. On the left—to which the detective pointed, were two entries. On the right there was a line of cramped writing.

"Your imprisonments," said the detective.

Amber said nothing, only he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"By my reckoning," the detective went on slowly, "you have been sentenced in your short but lurid career to some eighty years' penal servitude."

"It seems a lot," said Amber.

"It does," said the detective, and folded the paper. "So when you come to me and suggest that you would like to turn over a new leaf; would like in fact to join the criminal investigation department, I smile. You've pulled my leg once, but never again. Seriously, Amber," he went on, lowering his voice, "can you do anything for us in this forgery business?—the chief is getting very jumpy about the matter."

Amber nodded. "I think I can," he said, "if I can only keep out of prison for another week."

"Try," said Fell, with a smile. "I'll try," said Amber cheerfully.

CHAPTER VIII.

Francis Sutton Asks a Question.

LONDON never sleeps. Of the dead silence that lays over the world, the quiet peaceful hush of all living things, London knows nothing.

Long after the roar of the waking world dies down, there is a fitful rumbling of traffic, a jingling of bells, as belated hansoms come clip-clopping through the deserted streets, the whine of a fast motor-car—then a little silence.

A minute's rest from world noises, then the distant shriek of a locomotive and the staccato clatter of trucks. Somewhere, in a far-away railway

yard, with shunters' lanterns swinging, the work of a new day has already begun.

A far-off rattle of slow-moving wheels, nearer and nearer—a market cart on its way to Covent Garden; a steady tramp of feet—policemen going to their beats in steady procession. More wheels, more shrieks, a church clock strikes the hour, a hurrying footsteps in the street. . . .

All these things Lambaire heard, tossing from side to side in his bed. All these and more, for to his ear there came sounds which had no origin save in his imagination. Feet paused at his door; voices whispered excitedly. He heard the click of steel, the squeak of a key opening a handcuff. He dozed at intervals, only to sit up in bed suddenly, the sweat pouring off him, his ears strained to catch some fancied sound. The little clock over the fireplace ticked mercilessly, "ten years, ten years," until he got out of bed, and after a futile attempt to stop it, wrapped it in a towel and then in a dressing-gown to still its ominous prophecy.

All night long he lay, turning over in his mind plans, schemes, methods of escape, if escape were necessary. His bandaged head throbbed unpleasantly, but still he thought, and thought, and thought.

If Amber had the plates, what would he do with them? It was hardly likely he would take them to the police. Blackmail, perhaps. That was more in Amber's line. A weekly income on condition he kept his mouth shut. If that was the course adopted, it was plain sailing. Whitey would do something, Whitey was a desperate, merciless devil. . . . Lambaire shuddered—there must be no murder though.

HE had read that very day an article which showed that only four per cent. of murderers in England escape detection. . . . if by a miracle this blew over, he would try a straighter course. Drop the "silver business" and the "printing business" and concentrate on the River of Stars. That was legitimate. If there was anything shady about the flotation of the Company, that would all be forgotten in the splendid culmination. . . . De Beers would come along and offer to buy a share; he would be a millionaire. . . . other men have made millions and have lived down their shady past. There was Isadore Jarach, who had a palatial residence off Park Lane, he was a bad egg in his beginnings. There was another man. . . . what was his name. . . .

He fell into a troubled sleep just as the dawn began to show faintly. A knocking at the door aroused him, and he sprang out of bed. He was full of the wildest fears, and his eyes wandered to the desk wherein lay a loaded Derringer.

"Open the door, Lambaire."

It was Whitey's voice, impatiently demanding admission, and with a trembling hand Lambaire slipped back the little bolt of the door.

Whitey entered the room grumbling. If he too had spent a sleepless night, there was little in his appearance to indicate the fact.

"It's a good job you live at an hotel," he said. "I should have knocked and knocked without getting in. Phew! Wreck! You're a wreck!"

Whitey shook his head at him disapprovingly.

"Oh, shut up, Whitey!" Lambaire poured out a basin full of water, and plunged his face into it. "I've had a bad night."

"I've had no night at all," said

Whitey, "no night at all," he repeated shrilly. "Do I look like a sea-sick turnip? I hope not. You in your little bed,—me, tramping streets looking for Amber—I found him."

Lambaire was wiping his face on a towel, and ceased his rubbing to stare at the speaker.

"You didn't—" he said fearfully. Whitey's lips curled.

"I didn't kill him, if that's what you mean," he said shortly. "Don't jump, Lambaire, you're a great man for jumping—no, I didn't kill him—he lives in the Borough," he added inconsequently.

"How did you find out?" asked Lambaire.

"Don't pad," begged the other testily. "Don't ask questions for the sake of Asking Questions,—get dressed,—we'll leave Amber."

"Why?" Whitey put two long white fingers into his waistcoat pocket and found a golden tooth-pick; he used this absently, gazing through the window with a far-away expression.

"Lambaire," he said, as one who speaks to himself, "drop Amber,—cut him out. Concentrate on diamonds."

"That's what I thought," said Lambaire eagerly, "perhaps if we went out ourselves and looked round—"

"Go out be—blowed," snapped Whitey. "If you see me going out to Central Africa. . . . heat. . . . fever. . . . Rot! No, we'll see the young lady, tell her the tale; throw ourselves, in a manner of speaking, on her mercy—I've fixed an interview with young Sutton."

"Already?" "Already," said Whitey. "Got him on the 'phone."

"What about Amber and the plates?"

"Blackmail," said Whitey, and Lambaire chuckled gleefully.

"So I thought, of course that is the idea—what about Sutton?"

"He's coming here to breakfast; hurry up with your dressing."

HALF-AN-HOUR later Lambaire met him in the lounge of the hotel. A bath and a visit to the hotel barber had smartened him, but the traces of his night with Conscience had not been entirely removed, and the black silk bandage about his head gave him an unusually sinister appearance.

On the stroke of nine came Francis Sutton, carrying himself a little importantly, as became an employer in embryo, and the three adjourned to the dining-room.

There is a type of character which resolutely refuses to be drawn, and Francis Sutton's was such an one. It was a character so elusive, so indefinite, so exasperatingly plastic, that the outline one might draw to-day would be false to-morrow. Much easier would it be to sketch a nebula, or to convey in the medium of black and white the changing shape of smoke, than to give verity to this amorphous soul.

The exact division of good and bad in him made him vague enough; for no man is distinguished unless there is an overbalancing of qualities. The scale must go down on the one side or the other, or, if the adjustment of virtue and evil is so nice that the scale's needle trembles hesitatingly between the two, be sure that the soul in the balance is colourless, formless, vague.

Francis Sutton possessed a responsive will, which took inspiration from the colour and temperature of the moment. He might start forth from his home charged with a determina-



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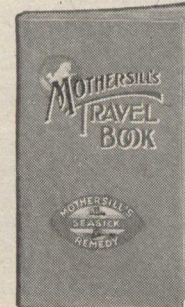
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