



THE RIVER OF STARS

BY EDGAR WALLACE

CHAPTER XV.—(Continued.)

THERE was a hole in the centre of the watercourse, and a discarded spade lay beside it. He picked it up and examined it. The blade was bright from use, the haft was polished smooth from constant handling. He put it down again and took a swift survey of the place.

He was in what was for all the world like a railway cutting. The dead river had worn its deepest channel here. On the moonlit side of the "cutting" he could see no place that afforded shelter. He walked along by the bank which lay in the shadow, moving the white beam of his lamp over its rugged side.

He thought he saw an opening a little way up. A big dead bush half concealed it—and that dead bush was perched at such an angle as to convince Amber that it owed its position to human agency.

Cautiously he began to climb till he lay under the opening. Then swiftly he plucked the dead brush away.

"Bang."

He felt the powder burn his face and pressed himself closer to the earth. Abiboo in the bed of the river below came with a leap up the side of the bank.

"Ba-lek!" shouted Amber warningly.

A hand, grasping a heavy army revolver, was thrust out through the opening, the long black muzzle pointing in the direction of the advancing Houssa. Amber seized the wrist and twisted it up with a jerk.

"Damn!" said a voice, and the pistol dropped to the ground.

Still holding the wrist, Amber called gently, "Sutton!" There was a pause.

"Who are you?" said the voice in astonishment.

"You'll remember me as Amber." There was another little pause.

"The devil you are!" said the voice; "let go my wrist, and I'll come out—thought you were the Alebi folk on the warpath."

Amber released the wrist, and by-and-by there struggled through a grimy tattered young man, indisputably Sutton.

He stood up in the moonlight and shook himself. "I'm afraid I've been rather uncivil," he said steadily, "but I'm glad you've come—to the 'River of Stars.'" He waved his hand towards the dry river bed with a rueful smile.

Amber said nothing.

"I should have left months ago," Sutton went on; "we've got more diamonds in this hole than—Curse the beastly things!" he said abruptly. He stooped down to the mouth of the cave.

"Father," he called softly, "come out—I want to introduce you to a sportsman."

Amber stood dumfounded and silent as the other turned to him.

"My father isn't very well," he said with a catch in his voice; "you'll have to help me get him away."

CHAPTER XVI.

Amber on Prospectuses.

THE RIVER OF STARS, LTD.

Share Capital, £800,000.

100,000 Ordinary Shares of £5 each.
30,000 Deferred Shares of £10 each.

Directors:

Augustus Lambaire, Esq. (Chairman).
Felix White, Esq.
The Hon. Griffin Pullerger.
Lord Corsington.

Such was the heading of the prospectus which found its way into

every letter-box of every house of every man who had speculated wisely, or unwisely, in stock exchange securities.

Both Lambaire and Whitey shirked the direct appeal to the public which city conventions demand. I think it was that these two men, when they were confronted with a straightforward way and a crooked way of conducting business with which they might be associated, instinctively moved towards the darker method.

When they had arrived in England they had decided upon the campaign: they came with greater prestige than they had ever dared to hope for—the discovery, astonishing as it had been to them at the moment, of the diamonds in Sutton's knotted handkerchief, gave support to their story, which was all the stronger since the proof of the mine's existence came from the enemy.

On the voyage to England they had grown tired discussing by what mysterious process, by what uncanny freak of fortune, the stones had been so found, and they had come to a condition of mind where they accepted the fact. The preparation of the prospectus had been a labour of love; there was no difficulty in securing a name or two for the directors. They had had the inestimable advantage of a press sensation. They might, in deed, have chosen the latter-day method of publishing in the newspapers. The prospectus was feasible.

There were not wanting critics who were curious as to the exact location of the diamond field of fabulous wealth, but this difficulty they had got over in part by the cunning constitution of the company, which allowed of a large portion of working capital for purposes of exploration; for the further development of "Company Property," and for the opening up of roads to the interior. The Company was registered in Jersey: the significance of that fact will be appreciated by those acquainted with Company procedure.

City editors, examining the prospectus, shook their heads in bewilderment. Some damned it instantly, some saw its romantic side and wrote accordingly. Not a few passed it unnoticed, following the golden precept, "No advertisement: no puff."

There is a type of shareholder who loves, and dearly loves a mystery. He lives in the clouds, thinking in millions. His high spirit despises the 2 1-2 per cent. of safety. He dreams of fortunes to come in the night, of early morning intimations that shares which cost him \$1.00 have risen to \$500.00. He can work out in his head at a moment's notice the profit accruing from the possession of a thousand such shares as these. It was from this class that Lambaire expected much, and he was not disappointed.

THE promise of the River of Stars was not explicit; there was a hint of risk—frankly set forth—a cunning suggestion of immense profit.

"Rap-rap!" went the knocker of fifty thousand doors as the weighty prospectus dropped with a thud upon the suburban mat . . . an interval of a day or so, and there began a trickle of reply which from day to day gathered force until it became a veritable stream. For this prospectus sought the letter-box furtively, rather than expensive advertising columns of the daily press. Lambaire, in his multifarious undertakings, had acquired addresses in very much the same way as small boys collect postage stamps. He collected addresses with discrimination. In one of the many books he kept—books which were never opened to any save himself, you might see

page after page as closely written as his sprawling calligraphy allowed, the names of "possibles," with some little comment on each victim.

"In many ways, Lambaire," said Whitey, "you're a wonder!"

The big man, to whom approval was as the breath of life, smiled complacently.

They sat at lunch at the most expensive hotel in London, and through the open windows of the luxurious dining-room came the hum of Piccadilly's traffic.

"We've got a good proposition," said Lambaire, and rubbed his hands comfortably, "a real good proposition. We've got all sorts of back doors out if the diamonds don't turn up trumps—if I could only get those stones of Sutton's out of my mind."

"Don't start talking that all over again—you can be thankful that things turned out as they did. I saw that feller Amber yesterday."

With a return to civilization, Amber had receded to the background as a factor. They now held him in the good-natured contempt that the prosperous have for their less prosperous fellows.

THERE was excuse for their sudden arrogance. The batch of prospectuses had produced an enormous return. Money had already begun to flow to the bankers of the "Stars."

"When this has settled down an' the thing's finished," said Whitey, "I'm goin' to settle down too, Lam! The crook line isn't good enough."

They lingered over lunch discussing their plans. It was three o'clock in the afternoon when Lambaire paid the bill, and arm in arm with Whitey walked out into Piccadilly.

They walked slowly along the crowded thoroughfare in the direction of Piccadilly Circus. There was a subject which Lambaire wished to broach.

"By the way, Whitey," he said, as they stood hesitating at the corner of the Haymarket, "do you remember a little memorandum we signed?"

"Memorandum?"

"Yes—in the Alebi forest. I forget how it went, but you had a copy and I had a copy."

"What was it about?"

Lambaire might have thought, had he not known Whitey, that the memorandum had slipped from his mind—but Lambaire was no fool.

He did not pursue the subject, nor advance the suggestion which he had framed, that it would be better for all concerned if the two tell-tale documents were destroyed. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Amber is in London," he said, "he arrived last Saturday."

"What about the girl?"

"She's been back months,"—Lambaire made a little grimace, for he had paid a visit to Pembroke Gardens and had had a chilling reception.

"You wouldn't think she'd lost a brother," he went on, "no black, no mourning, theatres and concerts every night—heartless little devil."

Whitey looked up sharply.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"One of my fellers," said Lambaire.

"Oh!" said Whitey.

He took out his watch. "I've got an appointment," he said, and jerked his head to an approaching taxi. "See you at the Whistlers."

Whitey was a man with no illusions. The wonder is that he had not amassed a fortune in a line of business more legitimate and more consistent than that in which he found himself. Since few men know themselves thoroughly well, and no man knows another at all, I do not attempt to explain the complexities of Whitey's mind. He had ordered the taxi driven

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