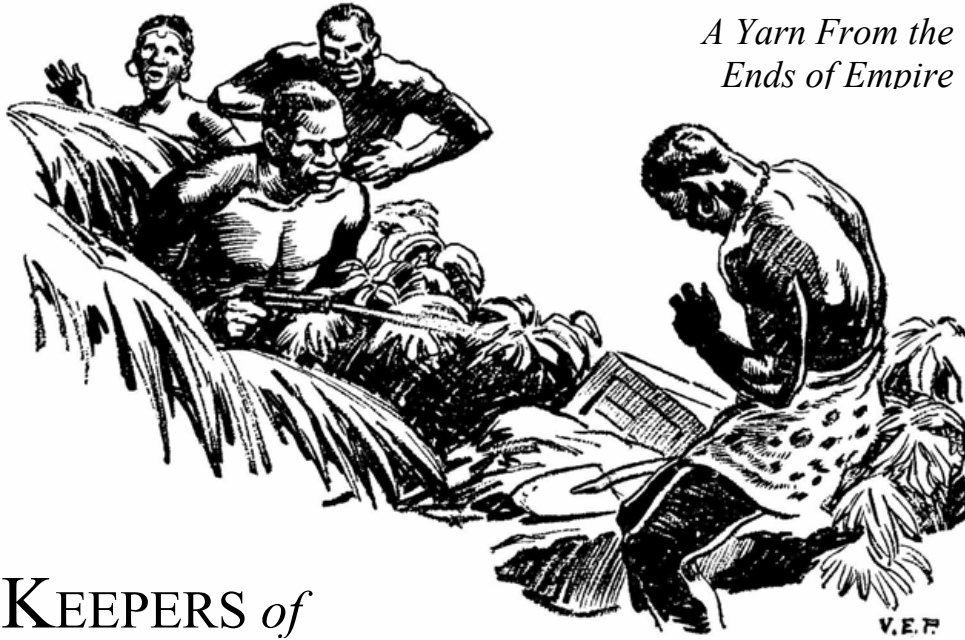


*A Yarn From the  
Ends of Empire*



## KEEPERS of the TREASURE By EDGAR WALLACE

**Y**EARS and years ago, *cala cala* as the saying is, when the Portuguese were in the land, came many canoes along the great river. In those days there was a river that ran through the N'gombi country; it is now an overgrown depression in the forest. Whence came this expedition nobody knew. The men camped on the edge of the Ochori country and made a fortification with the help of forced labor. Then came other men in pursuit, and there was a great battle of swords and spears, and in the end the attackers succeeded. Every defender was put to the sword, but when the victorious captain came to look for the ten great boxes which the fugitives had brought with them they were not to be found. They had been buried by somebody; legend gave credit to a score of somebodies.

From time to time adventurers had sought the hiding place. One chief of the Ochori, who was supposed to know where the boxes were hidden, had been put to the torture. Commissioners had made the most careful inquiries; commanders of expeditions who were of a romantical turn of mind had dug and probed—but all to no purpose.

There remained this substance to the legend, that in a village of the Ochori three men were called "The Keepers of the Treasure Place," and the office was hereditary and very old.

What treasure they guarded, no man knew. They professed to have exact information, and whispered their secret to every new guardian that death appointed.

The Portuguese treasure was a common subject of gossip up and down the coast. Once Lieutenant Tibbetts had made an ineffectual search, guided by a dream. Captain Hamilton of the King's Hussars suggested a remedy for such dreams.

"Coarseness, dear old thing!" murmured Bones, shocked. "Vulgarity, dear old officer! Come, come, this will never do!"

"Did you really dream you saw the cave?" asked Sanders, interested.

"Yes, excellency and friend. A dashed big cave in the side of the mountain. Wonderful lights, all colors, inside. And I stepped brightly into the cave an' there was a dear old johnny in a white robe, an angel or something ghastly, and he said—"

"Welcome, Ali Baba'?" suggested Hamilton.

Bones made a tutting noise.

The next time he went into the Ochori he came to a village reputedly built on or near the site of the treasure trove, and interviewed the chief.

"Lord, it is true that I and two very old men are keepers of this wonder which no man has seen because of the devils who sit under the trees by day and night and change into a hundred leopards when

man goes near them. But the place may not be told until I and the two old men die."

Bones spent a week in the forest, looking for a place where buried treasure might be, and all the time he was stalked by the slim widow who coveted the treasure. In course of time Bones went back to face the withering sarcasms of his superior officer. But the widow continued her search, for she had a rapacious lover who desired wealth—a tall, broad man who plastered his hair with clay and wore the skin of a leopard and stood around in statuesque attitudes, but did nothing much else to earn his living.

This woman, whose name was N'saki, had had three husbands and each of these died. There was nothing remarkable about their ends. They were very old, and the Dark One beckons such with great frequency. Such is the mind of man that when she offered herself to M'gama, the middle-aged chief of the village, he rejected her.

"It seems that there is a devil in you, N'saki, so that men who have loved you go quickly to the ghosts. Three Keepers of the Treasure have taken you to their huts and three have died. Now I desire to live, and all the loveliness you offer me is as nothing if I die."

N'saki was a rich woman, her three husbands having been plentifully blessed. Also, she was beautiful to look upon and so clever that she read men's minds. She was eighteen, slim as a reed, and childless. And she greatly wished to be the wife of the chief of the village, who reputedly shared the secret of the buried treasure. Some said this was dead ivory and some that it was white man's wealth. Her handsome lover favored the latter theory.

"All you have done is for nothing, woman," he said irritably. "Three dying men have you had in your hands and none told you the Magic Ground, and their places have been filled."

"O N'kema-M'libi!" she pleaded. "I did what was to be done. Some I choked a little, so that they were frightened; but because of their juju they feared worse to tell me. Now M'gama is a greater coward, and if he would have had me as his wife I would have made him speak. I will ask him again, and if he will not take me I will go to Bosambo and tell him of this treasure, for I think that M'gama knows of the little yellow cup."

Now this was true, that there had appeared in M'gama's hut a yellow cup of beautiful design, and

wise men knew it was gold, but none was so wise that he could guess where M'gama had found it. N'saki guessed.

"I will find a way," she said.

EVENTUALLY she found it, with the aid of a man from Senegal and another from the Kroo coast, who were at that moment newly arrived on the coast from the City and State of New York.

One of these was from Dakar, and his name was Fendi. He was a black man, Nubian black as distinct from the brown men of the river. The French did not like Fendi, who spoke three languages well; and since the French are masters of Senegal their antipathy counted. They did not like his influence or the prosperity which enabled him to live in enviable luxury; but their first objection to him was his poisonous contact with civilization. For Fendi had been to France, had fought in the ring both in Paris and in New York, and had been expelled from the latter city at the insistence of the immigration authorities.

Fendi had joined up with certain tough forces in Harlem, where he had lived for five years, and his American adventures had terminated with a gang fight in which razors, automatics and broken glass had figured conspicuously.

They took Fendi out of the hospital whither unloving hands had borne him and put him on a boat bound for the Coast.

"Come back and we'll bump you," said an official significantly.

"I shouldn't be the first gen'leman you've bumped," said Fendi defiantly.

He took away with him from the United States enough money to live—by Dakar standards—in comfort for the rest of his life.

With him was exported one Mr. Seluki, a native of Liberia and a Master of Arts of the University of Romeville, Oklahoma. That M.A. set him back two hundred bucks. Seluki stopped off at Dakar, and, with his friend, went up to St. Louis, which lies at the end of the railway. St. Louis was dull; Dakar was slow. They came back to the capital and settled down with certain undesirable elements in the lower town.

Fendi's pride in his hometown brought no enthusiastic response from his companion.

"Yuh! That governor general's palace is fine, but gimme Little Old!"

In this familiar way did he refer to the Empire City of New York.

In the lodging house where they stayed, they met a Christian, American trained native who had worked with the missionaries until he was found out. He had stories to tell of a land flowing with milk and honey; a raw, rich country stiff with dead ivory.

"Why, fellers, there was a guy from Liberia, a nigger named Bosambo, who went in and cleaned up; and he's worth a million dollars if he's worth talking about. And have you heard about the buried treasure? A million dollars' worth, and any guy could snatch it."

Fendi listened and was fascinated; Seluki had heard of Bosambo and the treasure before.

A month later the two boarded an Elder-Dempster boat southward bound.

"What you gotta do," counseled the Christian man, "is to play native. You go in fresh an' start cracking English and this guy Sanders'll fire you out so that you'll never feel the grass rustle under your feet. And don't pull any missionary stuff neither. He won't stand for alleluia niggers. Get him right and he's dead easy."

To the residency on a certain afternoon came two humble natives. Seluki, who talked Bomongo fluently, was the spokesman.

"Lord, we wish to go to our cousin Bosambo," he said glibly.

Mr. Commissioner Sanders surveyed the men coldly.

"You are Liberian, but this man is from Senegal," he said.

Fendi was startled. This was the first white man he had ever met who could differentiate one tribe from another at a glance.

"Also, you must tell me why you wish to go to the Ochori. Once before a poor relation of Bosambo came here and there was trouble, for Bosambo is no rich man with alms to give."

"Nor are we poor men, lord," said Seluki eagerly. "I bring a bag of silver and I have a book for money."

He produced before the skeptical commissioner a bag of veritable cash. The three boxes that had been landed on the beach were not opened.

"Go with God," said Sanders, "you and the Senegalese. But this is a wild country, and here there are many bad men. You shall not blame me if your money goes in the night."

Fendi smiled to himself.

THEY engaged paddlers from Chubiri to take them upstream. But long before they reached the Ochori country Bosambo had news of their coming, for Sanders had sent him a pigeon message; but, as the commissioner had not mentioned the bag of silver, Bosambo's greeting lacked cordiality.

The long journey upriver had been profitable in one respect. Fendi, like other natives of the coast, had a smattering of all the dialects; by the time they reached the Ochori city he was as proficient in Bomongo as his companions. He was not particularly happy.

"This country is one large morgue," he grumbled. "There isn't ten cents in any of these villages. Compared with them, a Harlem slum's like Riverside Drive. You've certainly got me for a sucker."

"You haven't seen the big stuff yet," said Seluki mysteriously, and Fendi grunted.

Fendi had the instincts of a gangster, and, providing there were any pickings to pick, he saw the immense possibility of this land which had distance without communication.

"It seems to me," he said, the day before they reached the Ochori, "there's no gat in the country, except them that the soldiers have got down to the mouth of the river."

Seluki explained the law. Firearms were prohibited. He had already told his friend that.

"I know," said Fendi, "but naturally I thought there would be a bit of graft here; someone must be running guns on the side."

He was impressed by the bulk of Bosambo, a little irritated by his hauteur.

"I see you, man," said Bosambo, addressing his fellow countryman Seluki. "I see you, yet I do not know you. I have nothing to give you, and when you have slept you shall take your paddlers and return to your own home. Who am I that I should keep hungry men from Liberia?"

"O Bosambo," said Seluki loftily, "I ask nothing of you. I come as a giver."

He clapped his hands, and one of his men lugged forward the bag of silver, and Seluki carefully unrolled the top. Bosambo looked and blinked.

"Ah, now I see that you are my friend," he said enthusiastically. "Tell me, brother, does Sandi

know you brought this great treasure for me?"

Seluki swallowed something.

"Sandi knows I have the money," he said, "but no man knows that I have brought this to you; for this is my own. Yet I will let you take all that your two hands can hold."

Bosambo stepped down from his stool and was about to plunge his hands into the bag, then stopped.

"First I will pray in my hut, for I am of the true faith, Seluki, and I will ask the guidance of the Prophet."

He was gone some time. When he reappeared he walked quickly to the bag, thrust in his hands and arms to his elbows, and Fendi gasped as he saw the amount that was removed. For some curious reason, money was not only held in the hands, but covered his arms like huge silver spangles.

"O ko!" said Seluki, in dismay.

Bosambo went straight to his hut, deposited the silver, and washed off the thick copal gum which he had spread on his arms. When he came back he was in the most amiable frame of mind.

"You shall sleep in my best hut, and tonight I will have a great dance for you. Tomorrow you shall sit in my palaver house on my right hand and my left, and the people shall do homage to you. As for that bag of silver, I will put it in a safe place."

"I know nothing safer than my own hut, Bosambo," said his guest with some acerbity.

There was a dance that night which was witnessed by two other strangers to the city. N'saki had come a long journey to make a palaver with Bosambo about a certain gold cup of curious design. . . .

After the dance Fendi saw a comely girl edging towards the select crescent of spectators. With a vanity which is eternal in man he thought her eyes were for him, and, detaching himself from the guests at a moment when all eyes were for the swaying bodies of the dancers, he came up to her.

"O woman, I am the man you seek."

Here he was wrong; but N'saki was an opportunist and knew him, by the quick reputation he had acquired, to be both rich and powerful.

"Tonight I shall sit in the little hut which has been made for me," he said. "Let us talk together and I will tell you of people like none other in the world."

She shook her head, which means "Yes." And that night she went to him, and, when she had the

opportunity of talking, she told him of M'gama and the little golden cup. . . .

THREE days after, he took from one of his boxes a bundle of cloth and, unrolling this, exposed four automatics with appropriate et ceteras. He and Seluki left, ostensibly on a hunting trip, accompanied by three bearers. Near to the village of M'gama the bearers were to be sent back, but before that could happen an unfortunate thing occurred. One of the bearers was a spy of Bosambo's, sent to report on the doing of the strangers. He was an inquisitive man and he was curious to know what were the contents of the little bags which the adventurers carried strapped to their shoulders.

In the dark of the night he opened one and saw the automatics and the spare magazines, and took counsel with his fellows.

"O ko! These men carry the little-little guns that say 'ha, ha,' and this Bosambo must know."

As they squatted over their fire Fendi rolled over to his companion and woke him.

"These niggers have lamped the gats, Selu. They gotta be bumped."

The "bumping" occurred at daybreak. Two of the bearers fell in their tracks and never knew what hit them. The third, the spy, ran for it, the bullets whistling after him. It was Seluki who dropped him at the edge of the small stream, Busini; and Fendi, running up, saw the water pink with blood and the swirl of a quickly moving crocodile.

He went back, and with his companion hid the bodies of the carriers he had slain.

"If that jane plays square, we'll be outta this country before there's a breeze. French territory's forty-five miles due north—and I'm a French subject!"

The jane was waiting an hour's march away from the scene of the tragedy, and with her tall and statuesque lover, who leaned on a spear and said nothing.

Her first words were disconcerting.

"Show me your little-little gun that killed Bosambo's men."

Being vain, Fendi showed her the automatic. To his surprise she handled the weapon scientifically.

"These I have seen," she said. "Once there was a soldier of Sandi who loved me for a week, and he showed me these mysteries."

She pulled back the safety catch, deftly removed

the magazine and replaced it, before she handed it back to the impatient gangster.

Her plan was simple. On the rind of the moon M'gama and the two old Keepers of the Treasure went out into the forest, throwing curses behind them and leaving their jujus to guard their path. So that any who followed or spied on them would be stricken blind and presently would be devoured inch by inch by a most terrible lizard.

"He will come this night," she said. "We will rest here until the trees go to sleep on the ground, and then I will show you the way."

**A**T SUNSET, when the shadows of the trees ran for enormous distances, she walked ahead of them into a gloom that became instantly night. The rind of the moon was in the sky when they reached their destination, and they squatted within sight of the forest path down which presently would come M'gama and the two trustees.

Punctually to the minute three figures came out of the gloom and vanished, with N'saki and the two strangers on their trail. For an hour they walked noiselessly until they came to a small knoll where stood four trees, and at the foot of the knoll M'gama and his two companions halted and performed mysterious rites, and would have gone away again, only Fendi and his companions stood in their path.

"Now," said Fendi, when the three old men were tied securely, "tell me where this beautiful treasure is hidden."

He questioned them all night, using various methods. One old man died in the process, but the other two were dumb. He had a brief consultation with Seluki.

"We'll have to let up on these two old guys," he said. "Give 'um a rest, and maybe tonight they'll squeal."

"What about the jane?" asked Seluki.

Fendi looked over his shoulder at the girl and her motionless lover.

"They've *gotta* be bumped," he said.

It was not two days or three days or yet four when the last of the living men spoke, and for six hours Fendi and his friend dug into the solid earth. They recovered many things that remained of the loot of a forgotten African monastery, filched by Portuguese filibusters: cups and chalices and golden vessels, and a rotting bag of gold coins.

The lover did not assist in the digging, but he helped carry the treasure to the river that trickled into the French territory, and which was eight miles distant. He even stirred himself to steal a big canoe from an upriver village. He chose upriver because the canoe floated down with a very small expenditure of energy. In the canoe the treasure was loaded.

"All is well now," said N'saki, "and I will tell you an island where you may go and hide."

"Sure!" said Fendi. "But let's go back and see if there's anything we've left behind."

The four trudged back to the treasure hole.

"O man," said Fendi, feeling stealthily for his gun, "look deep in that hole and see if there is anything we have forgotten."

The lover swaggered forward and bent over, and Fendi's gun jerked up and spat fire. He turned, his pistol poised, but the girl had vanished. He saw an agitated movement of long grass and fired twice; but when he dashed in the direction she had taken she was gone, and he could not find her.

"That's bad. We've got to catch that dame before she gets to the river," he said.

And then, unrolling his pack, he made a discovery.

"Where's that other gun?" he asked, and his face went gray.

For N'saki had once had a lover who taught her the mysteries of automatics.

Again he blundered through some undergrowth where he had detected a movement, and Seluki was close on his heels.

"I see you," said a hard little voice.

The men were so close to her that she could not miss. . . .

**A** PIGEON came to headquarters. Bones was hustled in the middle of the night onto the Zaire with twenty soldiers. And, steaming night and day, stopping only at the woodings, he came to the Ochori village, and a very serious Bosambo was waiting.

"Lord, there are guns in this country," he said. "Two men you sent to me went out in search of treasure, and they shot my private man. And because Sandi has said we must not go against guns, I sent for you."

Two of his fighting regiments were ready for the march. He strode by the side of Bones through the Ochori forest, and presently came to the village

of M'gama. But M'gama was not there. Trackers found his body and brought Lieutenant Tibbetts to the spot. Earth had been turned here, and Bones pointed.

"Set your young men to dig with their spears."

They dug for a short time and presently they found Fendi and his friend, but nothing else.

"These men have been shot," said Bosambo. "Here are the little guns."

Four pistols lay in the hole. N'saki had no further use for them; she was paddling a laden canoe towards the French territory, singing a song that was all about her dead lover and the treasure that would bring her many successors.

