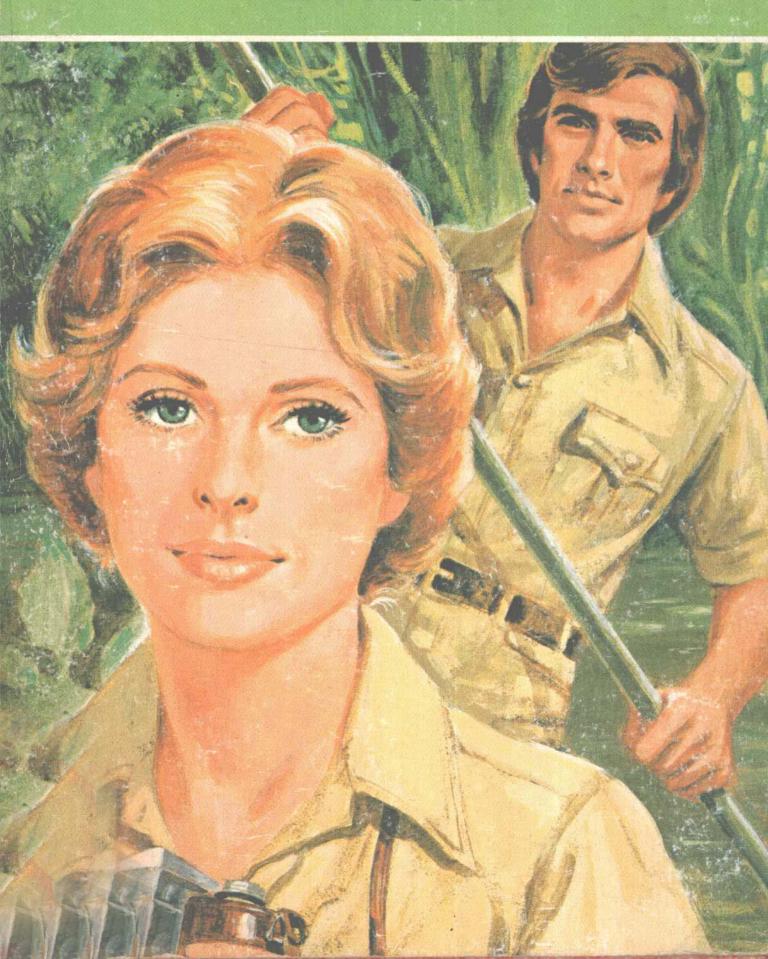


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The River Lord

by KAY THORPE



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CHAPTER ONE

From the river the golden dome of the opera house shimmered like a mirage in the pre-noon heat, as much out of place among the aggressively modern skyscrapers as they in turn seemed totally at odds with the dense forest nudging the perimeter of the city.

A thousand miles of the Amazon behind them, thought Keely wonderingly, and here they were right back in the midst of civilisation again. For the first time she could really begin to understand what Ben had meant by 'capturing the contrasts'. The prospect excited her, yet at the same time oddly disappointed. It was like being brought down to earth again after days spent in another world.

'Fantastic, isn't it?' commented her nearest neighbour along the boat's rail. 'Who'd imagine a place like this right out here in the middle of the jungle! This is turning out to be some real vacation, I must say. Can't wait to see what else they've got lined up for us.' She turned her head to glance at the girl at her side, eyes sliding over the vital face under its casual crop of bright red-gold hair to linger with no small envy on shapely curves clad in beige linen slacks and shirt. 'You planning to stay long in Manaus yourself?'

Keely smiled at her briefly, aware that the question was prompted by avid curiosity. 'Only as long as I need to complete my job. I'll be catching the next boat back.'

'That's this one at the weekend.' The American woman's voice changed a fraction. 'Not nervous of being on your own?'

'I don't think so. One city is much the same as another under the surface.' Keely didn't necessarily believe it, but it

sounded confident, and confidence was a handy attitude to cultivate on all occasions. Being alone on an assignment was no new experience, although this was certainly the farthest she had travelled to gain material for the glossy magazine for which she currently worked. Combining photography with an ability for verbal description gave her a somewhat wider scope than most, she supposed. At least, Ben Reynolds, the editor of World magazine, seemed to think so. This whole trip was a prize coveted by far more experienced people than herself, but it was she who had been chosen to cover it, much to her gratification. Saving the cost of sending two people out to South America, had been one loser's cynical reaction, though without particular malice; in three years Keely Weston had made herself surprisingly few enemies in a competitive business. Now, at twenty-four, she could afford to ignore such digs in the knowledge that her name was reason enough to have gained her the assignment.

After her parents had been divorced when she was twelve, Keely had gone all out for independence. She could still remember the trauma of her broken home life, the ceaseless to-ing and fro-ing between the separate homes of a mother and father intent on doing the right thing in sharing their child equally between them, regardless of the effect such instability might be having on that child's mind. Hardly surprising to anyone but they themselves when at eighteen she had walked out to start living her own life in an atmosphere where every day was not a tightrope to be walked between conflicting emotions. She had gone on seeing them both regularly over the years, of course, but on her own terms, not theirs. On no occasion as yet had she managed to bring herself to forgive either of them completely for what they had done to the three of them as a family.

'I'm going to be pretty busy anyway,' she tagged on, wielding her camera for a shot of the famous floating dock,

at present a good thirty feet below the permanent wharf. 'Hard to imagine, isn't it, that the water level is going to rise that much over the next month or so. From what the Captain was telling me yesterday, the big rains are already beginning up river, though they don't usually get down here before mid-December. I understand this is the last tourist trip up the Amazon for the season?'

'That's right. The Agency told us we'd be away long before things got rough, though as it's rained every day since we landed in Balem I can't see what difference it makes.'

'Only for a short time,' Keely responded. 'We've only had that one storm. Exciting, wasn't it?'

'If you like that sort of thing. Personally, I'll take the sunshine any day. That's what I'm paying for.' The glance was hard and bright. 'You folk have it easy. All this way just to take a few films. And paid for it too! How do you go about getting a job like yours?'

'Hard work and a lot of luck.' Keely let the camera fall back on its strap, carefully ironing out any sharpness from her tone. She was only too used to this kind of attitude from the public and refused to let it needle her. If they wanted to think of her job as a glorified holiday they were entitled. It was no skin off her nose. 'I suppose we'd better get ready to disembark. It was nice speaking to you.'

'Maybe we could get together over a drink later on,' put in the other as she made to move away. 'I'm travelling with a couple of friends. They're still packing. We might even be able to do you a bit of good . . . first impressions of the average tourist, and all that. The British enjoy seeing us Americans doing a bit of rubbernecking, don't they?'

Keely didn't bother arguing that one. 'I'm afraid I can't say what my plans will be,' she said. 'Perhaps I could contact you?'

'Sure. We'll be staying at the Carlton. The name is Stevens, Connie Stevens from New York.' 'Fine. I'll make a note of it.' Keely made her escape before the other could make any attempt to tie her down to a definite date. She had no intention of contacting the woman, of course. The two of them could have little in common. The opening up of the Amazon to tourism might be what this feature was all about, but there had to be better ways of showing the pros and cons than through any interview with Connie Stevens and company.

She was one of the first passengers ashore when the time finally came. The heat blasted her skin as she stepped down on to the open wharf, and she felt the trickle of perspiration down her back under her shirt. The big, broad-shouldered man talking with one of the river boat's officers gave her a swift but comprehensive glance as she passed by in the wake of her porter. Without looking directly at him she was still aware of the cynicism in that appraisal; of the tanned angularity of his features beneath thick dark hair. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a shirt which had both seen better days. Hardly anyone of importance, she reflected fleetingly, and then promptly forgot him in the need to secure some means of transport to her hotel before the tourist party commandeered it all.

It was the porter who managed it by the simple means of thrusting all opposition ruthlessly aside, tossing her case into the taxi in a way which made her thankful she was carrying her precious equipment herself. Passing through the city itself the contrasts were more easily seen, the old Portuguese architecture far more in accord with its setting than that of modern Brazil. The sky above looked washed out by the heat, pale and faintly hazed. A bank of cloud showed above the horizon to the west.

Her hotel was up towards the top of the city, not far from the deserted opera house. Passing the latter at close quarters, Keely found it difficult to imagine that some of the world's greatest singers had appeared there in their time—Caruso among them. Now it was decrepit, with green mould attacking its cracks and crevices; like the duck-egg blue cathedral, a monument to the great days of the rubber boom when the rich thronged to Manaus like pilgrims to Mecca.

The Hotel Caprican proved to be one of the older buildings, comfortably shabby both inside and out, with potted palms and canework much in evidence. Keely went to register at the scarred mahogany desk, summoning her few words of Portuguese to announce herself to the smiling desk clerk.

'I have some English, madam,' he informed her with enchanting politeness. 'There is cable for you from London.'

She took the buff envelope from him and opened it quickly. Something important must have cropped up for Ben to go to the trouble of contacting her. Normally it would be up to her to keep in touch with him, and that only if strictly necessary. So far as Ben Reynolds was concerned, anyone on assignment for the magazine completed their job on their own initiative in a given time. If she was capable of making the trip in the first place, she was capable of looking out for herself too while she was here.

The message was brief and too the point: Check on Colby expedition due leave Manaus 25th. That was all, but it was enough. Colby could only be Sir Mark Colby, the botanist; Keely recalled reading somewhere that he was in South America, although she hadn't realised it was right here in Manaus. Obviously Ben had got wind of something good. Enough so, anyway, to merit looking into. It shouldn't be too difficult to find out where the man was staying, even if it meant phoning round the various hotels. The twenty-fifth was two days off yet. That should give her more than enough time to find out what was going on.

She turned back to the clerk. 'Is there a telephone in my room?'

There was, he assured her. And a shower of her very

own. He would have her case brought up in a moment or two. In the meantime, would she be taking lunch in the hotel?

'Yes,' agreed Keely, and then abruptly changed her mind.
'No, on second thoughts I'll have it out later. I want to make some calls first.'

The room was blessedly cool and dim, latted shutters over the windows casting dusty shadows across the tiled floor. There was a bed pushed up against one wall with a bright woven cover thrown over it, and several pieces of dark heavy furniture. A door led through to a bathroom just large enough to hold an antiquated shower cabinet and essential appointments. The telephone standing on a small table beside the bed was surprisingly modern in appearance.

A youth wearing dark trousers and a white shirt brought up her case while she was still perusing the list of city centre hotels given in the book. Keely tipped him generously and was rewarded with a beaming grin as he departed. One could never make too many friends in a strange place. The receptionist apparently also doubled as the telephonist, somewhat to her relief. Her Portuguese was barely adequate to the ocasion, despite her crash course in the language during the week before her departure. On impulse she asked him at which hotels he would himself think it most likely for an eminent personage like Sir Mark Colby to be staying.

The third try proved lucky. Keely wrote down the name and location of the Rodrigus and calculated that late afternoon would probably be the best time to call on him. If this coming expedition proved of any particular interest readership-wise, she might be able to work a mention of it into her piece on Manaus. His name was certainly well enough known to the public. It was only last year that he had published a book on the carnivorous plant life of the world which had reached the best-seller lists. Sci-Fi

hysteria, Ben Reynolds had called it at the time. To a public brought up on monsters from outer space it came as something of a shock to realise that similar creatures already inhabited the planet earth.

Lunch out still seemed a good idea on the face of it. Keely took a quick shower and changed into a simple linen skirt and short-sleeved blouse for coolness, aware that she only had to step outdoors again to feel the full impact of the humid atmosphere. A brush over her short sleek cap of hair, a touch of lipstick and she was ready to go. Small point in applying powder to a skin already moist again. Let it shine! Green eyes took a last glance in the damp-spotted mirror as she picked up her camera case. At least the pale tan she had already acquired on the way up river stood her in good stead now.

She ate eventually at a small back street café where no one spoke any English and where her Portuguese caused ripples of mirth among staff and clientele alike. Keely joined in goodhumouredly, resorting to sign language to indicate what she wanted to eat from the dishes on display behind the glassed-in counter. By the time she was ready to leave it was with the feeling that here also she had made friends. The proprieter himself accompanied her to the door, waving her on her way with smiling entreaties for her swift return.

She had used up almost the whole of one spool by the time she reached the Rodrigus, eager to capture the flavour of this capital of the Amazonas. The hotel was large and luxurious, set within its own walled garden containing a tree which from a distance seemed to be covered in huge silver flowers. Only on approaching closer did it become evident that the flowers were simply great floppy leaves blown over so that the pale underside caught the sunlight. Water tinkled invitingly over a rocky pile to fall into a pool set out with lilies and edged with jacarandas. The sweet sticky scent of the tropics filled the air.

From the front of the hotel itself the view back over the gardens merited a picture in its own right. Keely angled for the best position, finally dropping to one knee on the sunheated stone to shoot the scene through the overhanging branches of a jacaranda which formed a perfect frame, totally oblivious of the curious stares of the passers-by.

It was as she rose from this latter position, intent on turning on the completed film, that she came into sharp contact with someone behind, almost dropping the camera in the process.

'Can't you look where you're going!' she demanded sharpy, turning on the man without pausing to consider whether or not he would understand the words. 'Of all the clumsy...' She stopped there abruptly, recognition instant and oddly unnerving as she looked up into sardonic grey eyes. He was dressed exactly as he had been on the wharf that morning, the dark hair thrust back by an impatient hand. There was nothing in the least apologetic in his expression.

'I'd say you were the one who needed to exercise caution,' ne responded on a clipped note. 'Snap-happy tourists are fast getting to be one of the natural hazards round here!'

Keely recovered herself with a jerk. 'In that case you should be ready for the unexpected. I wasn't invisible just because I happened to be kneeling down . . . unless you can't see anything below the level of your chest!'

His eyes went over her with deliberation, one eyebrow ising ironically. 'Not normally my trouble. How about you?'

Warmth rose under her skin and as swiftly faded again. That kind of remark deserved no answer. The man was untouth; an ignorant boor best left ignored. Chin lifting, the corner of her mouth curled in distaste, she stepped round aim to continue on her way into the hotel, closing her mind to the provocation of his grin. Twice in one day was more

than enough. She could only hope there would not be a third time.

The receptionist here spoke English too, she found, but was by no means as helpful as the one at her own hotel. Sir Mark Colby was not receiving visitors under any circumstances, she was told; especially members of the Press. Her arguments regarding her actual status in that particular sphere did nothing to impress the man either. So far as he was concerned the term was all-encompassing.

Keely was still trying to find a way of persuading him to at least phone through to the Colby suite and let Sir Mark decide the demarcation lines for himself when the young man who had approached the desk during the altercation suddenly broke in.

'I couldn't help overhearing all that,' he said to Keely with appealing diffidence. 'And I'm afraid he's right. Sir Mark isn't seeing anybody right now.'

She turned to him at once, ignoring the receptionist's vindicated expression. 'You know Sir Mark?' she asked.

'I'm his nephew.' Hazel eyes took on an appreciative sparkle as he studied her lively features. 'Jason Colby at your service, Miss...?'

'Weston. Keely Weston.' She returned his smile, assessing the possibilities behind this new turn of events. 'Are you just being polite or would you really like to help me?' she inquired with candour.

He looked taken aback for a moment, then laughed and shrugged. 'You don't give up easily, do you?'

'Not if I can help it. I'm a long way from home and badly in need of support.' She was laughing too, liking his frank, open looks. He was about her own age, she conjectured, and well dressed for the climate in lightweight fawn slacks and an open-necked shirt. Wavy brown hair topped his attractively boyish features. 'Surely the fact that we're both British in a foreign land lends me some priority?' she

begged. 'All I need is a few details regarding this coming expedition.'

Conflicting emotions fought briefly in Jason Colby's face before he appeared to make up his mind. 'Come and have a drink,' he said, 'and we'll talk about it. There's nothing particularly secret about the expedition. It's just that Mark wants it keeping out of the Press until he's verified the facts. There's a bar across the foyer there, or would you rather have some tea?'

'Tea sounds heavenly.' Keely's mind was racing, her memory file clicking open. Jason Colby was not only Sir Mark's nephew, he was also his assistant, she recalled. There had been several mentions of his contribution to the book which had brought the name into the limelight. Who better as a substitute for the great man himself? No secret about the expedition, he had said, but there had to be something unusual about it to have elicited Ben Reynolds' interest the way it had. It was up to her to discover what that something was and act upon the knowledge in the interests of the magazine.

They found comfortable seats in a small lounge leading off the main entrance hall, and Jason ordered English tea for two from an unsurprised waiter.

'They seem to get a very cosmopolitan clientele in here,' he observed. 'I have the feeling you could ask for dragon's blood and still get no reaction.' He looked at her for a moment. 'Are you on your own in Manaus?'

'I'm on my own, period,' Keely returned. 'Unless you count an editor back in London chewing his nails for a story from me.'

His brows contracted a little. 'About this expedition?'

'Not wholly. I work for World magazine. I'm here to do an article on the Amazonas as seen through the tourist's eyes.'

His grin was attractive. 'Quite a project. What do you

think of the "Green Hell" up to now?'

'It's more like Eden, except that I haven't even caught a solitary glimpse of a serpent yet. It's as hot as I anticipated, and I already knew it rained almost every day. Apart from that I came out with an open mind. The old explorers have been dead a long time.'

'You wouldn't think so if you went up river from here a few miles. It hasn't changed a great deal in thousands of years, much less fifty. Not that you're going to find any sixty-foot anacondas or foot-long centipedes, but the forest itself is awesome enough. It's a bit like being in a cathedral; you get that same sense of weighty silence and gloom. Take a few steps, turn around a few times and you're lost without a compass. That's the real danger.'

She was watching the play of expression across his face as he spoke. Now she said softly, 'If you feel that way about it why go out there?'

'It's my job . . . or a part of it.' He was obviously regretting the brief revealment of inner feelings to someone who was to all intents and purposes a stranger. 'The Amazon basin contains species of practically every kind of plant life known. It's a botanist's paradise. Anyway, we travel mostly by river, so the question of getting lost doesn't arise. I was thinking more of people like Colonel Fawcett. He disappeared in the forest searching for his pre-Inca cities, and he'd known it for more than twenty years.'

'And what,' asked Keely on a casual note, 'will Sir Mark be looking for on this trip you're about to make?'

Jason Colby's glance was suddenly sharp. 'How did you get to know about it in the first place? We only arranged it a matter of days ago.'

She pounced on the slip at once. 'Then it wasn't a part of your original plans when you came out to South America? That means it has to be something fairly special, I imagine.'

'Fairly.' He was giving little away as yet. 'You didn't

answer my question.'

The arrival of the tea forestalled further conversation for the moment. When the waiter had gone again she said with frankness, 'My editor's sources are as much of a mystery to me as anyone else. He cabled me from London to check out the Colby expedition, and that's as much as I know. I'm hoping you'll tell me what it's all about.'

His hesitation was apparent. 'I'm not supposed to be talking about it to anyone, much less the Press. For all we know the whole thing could turn out to be a wild goose chase. As you might know, Sir Mark isn't the kind to an-

nounce anything before it's an accomplished fact.'

'I'm not the Press, though,' she argued. 'At least, not in the way you mean. I'm not likely to rush off home and into print in any hurry. I'm not even due back till the end of the month. If you'll just give me some idea of what it is you're going after I'll guarantee not to publish anything until you get back. How will that do?'

'For me, fine. I can't always speak for my uncle.' He studied her a moment longer, then smiled and nodded. 'All right, I'll trust you for both of us. Immediate publicity certainly won't do any harm if we do find what we're looking for.' He paused again, this time with a certain deliberation.

'Did you ever hear of the Fire Flower?'

She shook her head. 'Not that I remember. Should I have?'

'I don't really suppose so, unless you happened to have read a very old book.' Nevertheless he sounded a mite disappointed. 'There was a rather obscure chap called Inman who came out here round about the time Fawcett was making his name and explored one or two of the tributaries off the Negro. He wrote a book about his experiences when he finally got back to England, full of the usual tales about murdering Indians and rivers crawling with piranha and