

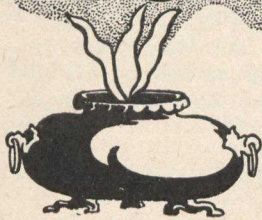
THE

YELLOW GOD

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD.

H. Rider Haggard



AUTHOR OF "SHE".

"KING SOLOMON'S MINES."
"THE WITCH'S HEAD", ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SAHARA, LIMITED.



SIR ROBERT AYLWARD, Bart., M.P., sat in his office in the city. It was a very magnificent office, quite one of the finest that could be found within half a mile of the Mansion House.

"There is so much in externals," Mr. Champers-Haswell, Sir Robert's partner, would say in his cheerful voice. "We are all of us

influenced by them, however unconsciously. Impress the public, my dear Aylward. Let solemnity without suggest opulence within."

Sir Robert was seated at his ebony desk playing with a pencil, and the light from a cheerful fire fell upon his face. In its own way it was a remarkable face as he appeared then in his four and fortieth year; very pale, but with a natural pallor, very well cut, and on the whole impressive. His eyes were dark, matching his black hair and pointed beard, and his nose was straight and rather prominent. Perhaps the mouth was his weakest feature, for there was a certain shiftiness about it, also the lips were thick and slightly sensuous. Sir Robert knew this, and therefore he grew a moustache to veil them somewhat. To a careful observer the general impression given by his face was such as is left by the sudden sight of a waxen mask.

"Great heavens!" he muttered, "what a game to have played; and it will go through. I believe that it will go through."

He stopped at the table, switched on an electric light, and made a rapid calculation on the back of a letter with a blue pencil.

"Yes," he said, "that's my share, a million and seventeen thousand in cash, and two million in ordinary shares, which can be worked off at a discount—let us say another seventeen hundred and fifty thousand, plus what I have got already—put it at only two hundred and fifty thousand net. Two millions in all, which, of course, may, or may not, be added to—probably not, unless the ordinaries boom—for I don't mean to speculate any more. That's the end of twenty years' work, Robert Aylward."

He walked down the room, and stopped opposite an ancient marble, staring at it—

"Not Venus, I think," he said with a laugh. "Venus never made any man rich." He turned and retraced his steps to the other end of the room, which was veiled in shadow.

Here upon a second marble pedestal stood an object that gleamed dimly through the gloom. It was about ten inches or a foot high, but in that place nothing more could be seen of it, except that it was yellow and had the general appearance of a toad. For some reason it seemed to attract Sir Robert Aylward, for he halted to stare at it, then stretched out his hand and switched on another lamp, in the hard brilliance of which the thing upon the pedestal suddenly declared itself, leaping out of the darkness into light. It was a terrible object, a monstrosity of indeterminate sex and nature but surmounted by a woman's head and face of extraordinary, if devilish loveliness, sunk back between high but grotesquely small shoulders, like to those of a lizard, so that it glared upwards. The workmanship of the thing was rude yet strangely powerful. Whatever there is cruel, whatever there is sensual, whatever there is inhuman in the dark places of the world, shone out of the jewelled eyes

which were set in that yellow woman's face, yellow because its substance was of gold, a face which seemed not to belong to the embryonic legs beneath, for body there was none, but to float above them. A hollow, life-sized mask with two tiny frog-like legs, that was the fashion of it.

"You are an ugly brute," said Sir Robert, contemplating this effigy; "but although I believe in nothing in heaven above or earth below, except the abysmal folly of the British public, I am bothered if I don't believe in you. At any rate from the day when Vernon brought you into my office my luck turned, and to judge from the smile on your sweet countenance I don't think it is done with yet. I wonder what those stones are in your eyes. Opals I suppose, from the way they change colour. They shine uncommonly to-day. I never remember them so bright. I—"

At this moment a knock came on the door. Sir Robert turned off the lamp and walked back to the fireplace.

"Come in," he said, and as he spoke once more his pale face grew impassive and expressionless. The door opened, and a clerk entered.

"I don't think I rang, Jeffreys."

"No, Sir Robert," answered the clerk, bowing as though he spoke to a Royalty, "but there is a little matter about that article in 'The Cynic.' We are paying this paper thirty guineas to insert an article about Sahara, Limited, and they say that if they have to put in the 'national and imperial' business they must have twenty more."

"Indeed, Jeffreys? Why?"

"Because, Sir Robert—I will tell you because you always like to hear the truth—their advertisement editor is of opinion that this Sahara, Limited, is a national and imperial swindle. He says that he won't drag the nation and the empire into it in an editorial under fifty guineas."

A faint smile flickered on Sir Robert's face.

"Does he, indeed?" he asked. "Well, we don't want to quarrel with them just now—feed the sharks. But surely, Jeffreys, you didn't come to disturb me about such a trifle?"

"Not altogether, Sir Robert. There is something more important. 'The Daily Judge' not only declines to put in any article whatsoever, but refuses our advertisement, and states that it means to criticise the prospectus trenchantly."

"Ah!" said his master after a moment's thought, "that is rather serious, since people believe in the 'Judge' even when it is wrong. Offer them the advertisement at treble rates."

"It has been done, sir, and they still refuse."

"That will do, Jeffreys. When Major Vernon comes in, give him my compliments and say that I should be obliged by a word or two with him."

The clerk bowed and went as noiselessly as he had entered.

"Let's see," added Sir Robert to himself. "Old Jackson, the editor of 'The Judge,' was a great friend of Vernon's father, the late Sir William Vernon, G.C.B. I believe that he was engaged to be married to his sister years ago, only she died or something. So the Major ought to be able to get round him if anybody can. Only the worst of it is I don't altogether trust that young gentleman. It suited us to give him a share in the business because he is an engineer who knows the country, and this Sahara scheme was his notion, a very good one in a way, and for other reasons. Now he shows signs of kicking over the traces, wants to know too much, is developing a conscience, and so forth. As though the promoters of speculative companies had any business with consciences. Ah! Here he comes."

Sir Robert seated himself at his desk and re-

sumed his calculations upon a half-sheet of note-paper, and that moment a clear, hearty voice was heard speaking to the clerks in the outer office. Then came the sound of a strong, firm footstep, the door opened, and Major Alan Vernon appeared.

He was still quite a young man, not more than thirty-two or three years of age, though he lacked the ultra robust and rubicund appearance which is typical of so many Englishmen of his class at this period of life. A heavy bout of blackwater fever acquired on service in West Africa, which would have killed anyone of weaker constitution, had robbed his face of its bloom and left it much sallow if more interesting than once it had been. For in a way there was interest about the face; also a certain charm. It was a good and honest face with a rather eager, rather puzzled look, that of a man who has imagination and ideas and who searches for the truth but fails to find it.

"Jeffreys tells me that you want to see me about something, Sir Robert," he said in his low and pleasant voice, looking at the baronet rather anxiously.

"Yes, my dear Vernon, I want to ask you to do something, if you kindly will, although it is not quite in your line. Old Jackson, the editor of 'The Judge,' is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"He was a friend of my father's, and I used to know him slightly."

"Well, that's near enough. As I daresay you have heard, he is an unreasonable old beggar, and has taken a dislike to our Sahara scheme. Someone has set him against it, and he refuses to receive advertisements, threatens criticism, etc. Now, the opposition of 'The Judge,' or any other paper, won't kill us, and if necessary we can fight him, but at the same time it is always wise to agree with your enemy while he is in the way, and, in short—would you mind going down and explaining his mistake to him?"

Before answering, Major Vernon walked to the window leisurely and looked out.

"I don't like asking favours from family friends," he replied at length, "and, as you said, I think it isn't quite in my line. Though of course, if it has anything to do with the engineering possibilities I shall be most happy to see him," he added, brightening.

"I don't know what it has to do with; that is what I shall be obliged if you will find out," answered Sir Robert, with some asperity. "One can't divide a matter of this sort into water-tight compartments. It is true that in so important a concern each of us has charge of his own division, but the fact remains that we are jointly and severally responsible for the whole. I am not sure that you bear this sufficiently in mind, my dear Vernon," he added with slow emphasis.

His partner moved quickly; it might almost have been said that he shivered, though whether the movement, or the shiver, was produced by the argument of joint and several liability or by the familiarity of the "my dear Vernon," remains uncertain. Perhaps it was the latter, since although the elder man was a baronet and the younger only a retired Major of Engineers, the gulf between them, as any one of discernment could see, was as wide as that which separated Dives and Lazarus in the parable.

"I think that I do bear it in mind, especially of late, Sir Robert," answered Alan Vernon slowly.

"That's all right. My motor is outside and will take you to Fleet Street in no time. Meanwhile you might tell them to telephone that you are coming, and perhaps you will just look in when you get back."

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