



THE

YELLOW GOD

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD.

T.T. & Co. Ltd.



AUTHOR OF "SHE".

"KING SOLOMON'S MINES."

"THE WITCH'S HEAD", ETC.

Resume: Major Alan Vernon withdraws from partnership with Sir Robert Aylward and Mr. Champers-Haswell, promoters of Sahara, Limited, because the editor of "The Judge" has informed him of the company's dishonorable methods. Vernon refuses to sell to Sir Robert a curious idol which has been a feature of the office for over a year, and which seems to have a talismanic quality. Vernon spends the week-end at "The Court," Mr. Champers-Haswell's home, and while there Jeeki, the negro servant, tells the story of the idol, the "Yellow God," which was brought from Africa. Miss Barbara Champers, the niece of the host, is the object of Sir Robert Aylward's and also Major Vernon's devotion.

CHAPTER IV.

BARBARA.



HERE was no bridge or billiards at the Court that night, where ordinarily the play ran high enough. After Mr. Haswell had been carried to his room, some of the guests—among them Sir Robert Aylward—went to bed, remarking that they could do no good by sitting up; while others, more concerned, waited to hear the

verdict of the doctor, who must drive from six miles away. He came, and half an hour later Barbara entered the billiard room and told Alan, who was sitting there, smoking, that her uncle had recovered from his faint and that the doctor, who was stopping there all night, said that he was in no danger, only suffering from a heart attack brought on apparently by over-work or excitement.

At breakfast, as in her note she had said she would, Barbara appeared wearing a short skirt. Sir Robert, who was there also, looking extremely pale even for him, and with black rims round his eyes, asked her if she was going to golf, to which she answered that she would think it over. It was a somewhat melancholy meal, and as though by common consent, no mention was made of Jeeki's tale of the Yellow God, and beyond the usual polite inquiries, very little of their host's seizure.

As Barbara went out she whispered to Alan, who opened the door for her, "Meet me at half-past ten in the kitchen garden."

Accordingly, having changed his clothes surreptitiously, Alan, avoiding the others, made his way by a circuitous route to the kitchen garden, which, after the fashion of modern places, was hidden behind a belt of trees nearly a quarter of a mile from the house. Here he wandered about till presently he heard Barbara's pleasant voice behind him saying:

"Don't dawdle so, we shall be late for church."

So they started somewhat furtively, like runaway children. As they went Alan asked how her uncle was.

"All right now," she answered, "but he has had a bad shake. It was that Yellow God story which did it. I know, for I was there when he was coming to, with Sir Robert. He kept talking about it in a confused manner, saying that it was swimming to him across the floor, till at last Sir Robert bent over him and told him to be quiet, quite sternly. Do you know, Alan, I believe your pet fetish has been manifesting itself in some unpleasant fashion up there in the office."

"Indeed! If so, it must be since I left, for I never heard of anything of the sort, nor are Aylward and your uncle likely people to see ghosts. In fact, Sir Robert wished to give me more than £15,000 for the thing only the day before yesterday, which

doesn't look as though it had been frightening him."

"Well, he won't repeat the offer, Alan, for I heard him promise my uncle only this morning that it should be sent back to Yarleys at once. But why did he want to buy it for such a lot of money? Tell me quickly, Alan, I am dying to hear the whole story."

So he began and told her, omitting nothing, while she listened eagerly to every word, hardly interrupting him at all until they reached the church.

The simple service went on; the first lesson was read. It cried woe upon them that join house to house and field to field, that draw iniquity with cords of vanity and sin as it were with a cart-rop; that call evil good and good evil, that put darkness for light and light for darkness, that justify the wicked for reward; that feast full but regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hand, for of such it prophesied that their houses, great and fair, should be without inhabitant and desolate.

It was very well read, and Alan, listening, thought that the denunciations of the old seer of thousands of years ago were not inappropriate to the dwellers in some houses great and fair of his own day, who, whatever they did or left undone, regarded not the work of the Lord neither considered the operation of His hand.

"Shall we walk home by the woods, Alan?" asked Barbara. "It is three miles round, but we don't lunch till two."

"What did you mean, Barbara, when you said that I should be a grateful man to-day?" asked Alan presently.

Barbara looked him in the eyes in that open, virginal fashion of hers, and answered in the words of the lesson, "Woe unto them that draw iniquity with the cords of vanity and sin as it were with a cart-rop, that lay house to house"—and through an opening in the woods she pointed to the roofs of the Court standing on one hill, and to the roof of Old Hall standing upon another—"and field to field" and with a sweep of her hand she indicated all the country round, "for many houses great and fair that have music in their feasts shall be left desolate." Then turning, she said:

"Do you understand now, Alan?"

"I think so," he answered. "You mean that I have been in bad company."

"Very bad, Alan. One of them is my own uncle, but the truth remains the truth. Alan, they are no better than thieves; all this wealth is stolen, and I thank God that you have found it out in time before you became one of them in heart as well as in name."

"If you mean the Sahara Syndicate," he said, "the idea is sound enough; indeed, I am responsible for it. The thing can be done, great benefits would result—too long to go into."

"Yes, yes, Alan, but you know that they never mean to do it, they only mean to get the millions from the public. I have lived with my uncle for ten years, ever since my poor father died, and I know the backstairs of the business. There have been half a dozen schemes like this, and although they have had their bad times, very bad times, he and Sir Robert have grown richer and richer. But what has happened to those who have invested in them? Oh! let us drop the subject, it is unpleasant. For myself, it doesn't matter, because, although it isn't under my control, I have money of my own. You know we are a plebeian lot on the male side, my grandfather was a draper in a large way of business, my father was a coal merchant who made a great fortune. His brother, my uncle, in whom my father always believed implicitly, took to what is called finance, and when my father died he left me, his

only child, in his guardianship. Until I am five and twenty I cannot even marry or touch a halfpenny without his consent; in fact, if I should marry against his will the most of my money goes to him."

"I expect that he has got it already," said Alan.

"No, I think not. I found out that, although it is not mine, it is not his. He can't draw it without my signature, and I steadily refuse to sign anything. Again and again they have brought me documents, and I have always said that I would consider them at five and twenty, when I came of age under my father's will. I went on the sly to a lawyer in Kingswell, and paid him a guinea for his advice, and he put me up to that. 'Sign nothing,' he said, and I have signed nothing, so, except by forgery, nothing can have gone. Still for all that it may have gone. For anything I know I am not worth more than the clothes I stand in, although my father was a very rich man."

"If so, we are about in the same boat, Barbara,"

Alan answered with a laugh, "for my present possessions are Yarleys, which brings in about £100 a year less than the interest on its mortgages and cost of upkeep, and the £1,700 that Aylward paid me back on Friday for my shares. If I had stuck to them I understand that in a week or two I should have been worth £100,000, and now you see, here I am, over thirty years of age, without a profession, invalidated out of the army, and having failed in finance, a mere bit of driftwood without hope and without a trade."

"You are a curious creature, Alan," she said. "Why didn't you take the £15,000 for that fetish of yours? It would have been a fair deal and have set you on your legs."

"I don't know," he answered dejectedly. "It went against the grain, so what is the use of talking about it? I think my old uncle Austin told me it wasn't to be parted with. No, perhaps it was Jeeki. Bother the Yellow God, it is always cropping up."

"Yes," replied Barbara, "the Yellow God is always cropping up, especially in this neighbourhood."

"I daresay I am a fool," said Alan. "If I wasn't I should not have mentioned my misfortune to you, but sometimes things are too much for one. Forget it and forgive me."

"Oh! yes," she said, "I forgive you; a woman can generally forgive a man for being fond of her. Whatever she may say, she is ready to take a lenient view of his human weakness. But as to forgetting, that is a different matter. I don't exactly see why I should be so anxious to forget, who haven't many people to care about me," and she looked at him in quite a new fashion.

"You—don't—mean," he said doubtfully, "you don't really mean?" and he stood hesitating.

"If you would put your question a little more clearly, Alan, I might be able to give you an answer," she replied, that quaint little smile of hers creeping to the corners of her mouth like sunshine through a mist of rain.

"You don't really mean," he went on, "that you care anything about me, like, like I have cared for you for years?"

"Oh, Alan!" she said, laughing outright, "why in the name of goodness shouldn't I care about you? I didn't say that I do, mind, but why shouldn't I? What is the gulf between us?"

"The old one," he answered, "that between Dives and Lazarus."

"Alan," said Barbara, looking down, "I don't know what has come over me, but for some unexplained and inexplicable reason I am inclined to give Lazarus a lead—across that gulf."

"I love you, I love you!" he said huskily.

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