

THE YELLOW GOD

Author of "She," "King Solomon's Mines," "The Witch's Head," Etc.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

Resume: Major Alan Vernon withdraws from partnership with Sir Robert Aylward and Mr. Chompers-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. Chompers-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 Chompers, the niece of the host, is the object of Sir Robert Aylward's and also Major Vernon's devotion. Alan finally wins Barbara's promise to become his wife but their engagement is to be kept secret. Sir Robert becomes Alan's bitter enemy on learning of the betrothal. Alan and Jeeki set out for Africa in search of treasure from the worshippers of the Yellow God, "Little Bonga." In their African adventures, Major Vernon and Jeeki are attacked by dwarfs, armed with poisoned arrows, who are driven off by a cannibal tribe, the Ogula, who take Alan and Jeeki prisoners but treat them kindly on account of the Yellow God. Alan falls sick but the Ogula take him and Jeeki up the river. They reach the Gold House where the Yellow God is placed and meet the wonderful priestess, Asika, who takes them through the treasure house. The Gold House is a great revelation of riches but Alan and Jeeki become anxious when they observe Asika's determination to make the former her husband. At the feast of Little Bonga, Alan is disgusted by the slaughter and heathen orgies. Alan is given a store of gold which he sends to coast by Jeeki's mother and some of the Ogula whose chief, Fahni, is anxious to be rescued.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TREASURE HOUSE.



ALAN'S recovery was rapid, since, as the Asika told him, if a patient lived through it, the kind of fever that he had taken did not last long enough to exhaust his vital forces. When she asked him if he needed anything to make him well, he answered: "Yes, air and exercise." She replied that he should have both, and next morning his hated mask was put upon his face and he was supported by priests to a door where a litter, or rather litters, were waiting, one for himself and another for Jeeki, who, although in robust health, was still supposed to be officially ill and not allowed to walk upon his own legs. They entered these litters and were borne off, till presently they met a third litter, of particularly gorgeous design, carried by masked bearers, wherein was the Asika herself, wearing her coronet and a splendid robe.

Into this litter, which was fitted with a second seat, Alan was transferred. They went up the mountain side and to the edge of the great fall, and watched the waters thunder down, though the crest of them they could not reach.

This journey was the first of many. Every day the litters were waiting, and they visited some new place, although into the town itself they never went. Moreover, if they passed through outlying villages, although Alan was forced to wear his mask, their inhabitants had been warned to absent themselves, so that they saw no one. On certain days, at Alan's request, they were taken to the spots where the gold was found, in the gravel bed of an almost dry stream that during the rains was a torrent.

He descended from the litter, and with the help of the Asika and Jeeki, dug a little in this gravel, not without reward, for in it they found several nuggets. Above, too, where they went afterwards, was a huge quartz reef denuded by water, which evidently had been worked in past ages, and was still so rich that in it they saw plenty of visible gold.

Not wishing to drift into discussion on the matter of love, Alan once asked the Asika to define "her soul," whence it came and whither she believed it to be going.

"My soul is I, Vernoon," she answered, "and already very, very old. Thus it has ruled amongst this people for thousands of years."

"How is that?" he asked, "seeing that the Asika dies?"

"Oh! no, Vernoon, she does not die, she only changes. The old body dies, the spirit enters into another body which is waiting. Thus, until I was fourteen, I was but a common girl, the daughter of a headman of that village yonder, at least so they tell me, for of this time I have no memory. Then the Asika died, and as I had the secret marks and the beauty that is hers, the priests burnt her body before Big Bonga, and suffocated me, the child, in the smoke of the burning. But I awoke again, and when I awoke the past was gone and the soul of the Asika filled me, bringing with it its awful memories, its gathered wisdom, its passion of love and hate, and its power to look backward and before."

"Do you ever do these things?" asked Alan.

"Backward, yes; before, very little; since you come, not at all, because my heart is a coward and I fear what I might see. Oh! Vernoon, Vernoon, I know you and your thoughts. You think me the beautiful beast who loves like a beast, who loves you because you are white and different from our men. Well, what there is of the beast in me the gods of my people gave, for they are devils and I am their servant. But there is more than that, there is good also which I have won for myself. I knew you would come, I knew you would come," she went on passionately. "You do not believe me, Vernoon. Very well, this night you shall see, you and that black dog of yours, that you may know I do not trick you, and he shall tell me what you see, for he, being but a low-born beast, will speak the truth."

Now Alan was more frightened that he had been since he set foot in Asiki-land, for of a sudden this woman became terrible to him. He felt that she knew things which were hidden from him. For the first time he believed in her, believed that she was more than a mere passionate savage set by chance to rule over a bloodthirsty tribe; that she was one who had a part in his destiny.

"Felt the hook?" he muttered. "I do not understand."

"You are very forgetful," she answered. "Vernoon, we have lived and loved before, who were twin souls from the first. That man now, whom I told you lived once on the great river called the Nile, have you no memory of him? Well, well, let it be. I will tell you afterwards. Here we are at the Gold House again; to-night, when I am ready, I will send for you, and this I promise, you shall leave me wiser than you were."

When they were alone in their private room, Alan told Jeeki of the expected entertainment of crystal gazing, or whatever it might be, and the part that he was to play in it.

"You say that again, Major," said Jeeki.

Alan repeated the information, giving every detail that he could remember.

"Oh!" said Jeeki, "I see. Asika show us things, 'cause she afraid to look at them herself or take oath, or can't, or something. She no ask you tell her what she see, because you too kind hurt her feeling, if happen to be something beastly. But Jeeki must tell her because he so truthful and not care curse about her feeling. Well, that all right, Jeeki tell her sure enough. Only, Major, don't you interrupt. Quite possible, these magic things, I see one show you see another. So don't you go say 'Jeeki, that a lie,' and give me away to Asika just because you think you see different, 'cause if so you put me into dirty hole, and of course I catch it afterwards. You promise, Major?"

"Oh, yes, I promise. But, Jeeki, do you really think we are going to see anything?"

"Can't say, Major," and he shook his head gloomily. "P'raps all put-up job. But lots of rum things in world, Major, specially among beastly African savage, who very curious, and always ready to pay blood to bad spirit. Hope Asika not get this into her head, because no one know what happen. P'raps we see too much and scared all our lives; but p'raps all tommy rot."

"That's it—tommy rot," answered Alan, who was not superstitious. "Well, I suppose that we must go through with it. But, oh! Jeeki, I wish you would tell me how to get out of this."

"Don't know, Major; p'raps never get out; p'raps learn something to-night. Have to do something soon if want to go. The Mungana's time nearly up, and then—oh, my eye!"

It was night, about ten o'clock indeed, the hour at which Alan generally went to bed. No message had come, and he began to hope that the Asika had

forgotten, or changed her mind, and was just going to say so to Jeeki when a light coming from behind him attracted his attention and he turned, to see her standing in a corner of the great room holding a lamp in her hand and looking towards him. Her gold breastplate and crown were gone, with every other ornament, and she was clad, or rather muffled, in robes of pure white fitted with a kind of nun's hood, which lay back upon her shoulders. Also on her arm she carried a shawl or veil. Standing thus, all undecked, with her long hair fastened in a simple knot, she still looked very beautiful, more so than she had ever been, thought Alan, for the cruelty of her face had faded and was replaced by a mystery very strange to see. She did not look quite like a woman, and that was the reason, perhaps, that Alan, for the first time, felt attracted by her. Hitherto she had always repelled him, but this night it was otherwise.

"How did you come here?" he asked in a more gentle voice than he generally used towards her.

Noting the change in his tone, she smiled shyly and even coloured a little, then answered:

"This house has many secrets, Vernoon. When you are lord of it you shall learn them all, till then I may not tell them to you. But, come, there are other secrets which I hope you shall see to-night, and Jeeki, come you also, for you shall be the mouth of your lord, so that you may tell me what perhaps he would hide."

"I will tell you everything, everything, O Asika," answered Jeeki, stretching out his hands and bowing almost to the ground.

Then they started and following many long passages as before, although whether they were the same or others Alan could not tell, came at last to a door that he recognised, that of the Treasure House. As they approached this door it opened, and through it, like a hunted thing, ran the bedizened Mungana, husband of the Asika, terror, or madness, shining in his eyes. Catching sight of his wife, who bore the lamp, he threw himself upon his knees, and snatching at her robe, addressed some petition to her, speaking so rapidly that Alan could not follow his words.

For a moment she listened, then dragged her dress from his hand and spurned him with her foot.

With a groan or a sob, it was difficult to say which, the poor man rose and perceived Alan, whose face he now beheld for the first time, since the Asika had told him not to mask himself, as they would meet no one. The sight of it seemed to fill him with jealous fury; at any rate he leapt at his rival, intending, apparently, to catch him by the throat. Alan, who was watching him, stepped aside, so that he came into violent contact with the wall of the passage, and, half-stunned by the shock, reeled onwards into the darkness.

Alan, who wished for no confidences, asked what the Mungana was doing in the Treasure House; to which she answered that the spirits who dwelt there were eating up his soul, and when they had devoured it all, he would go mad and kill himself.

Then she led the way into the hall and up it, passing between the heaps of gold.

On the table where lay the necklaces of gems she set down her lamp, whereof the light, all there was in that great place, flickered feebly upon the mask of Little Bonga, which had been moved there, apparently for some ceremonial purpose; and still more feebly upon the hideous, golden countenances and winding sheets of the ancient, yellow dead.

"Sit here in front of me," the Asika said to Alan, "and you, Jeeki, sit at your lord's side, and be silent till I bid you speak."

Then she crouched down in a heap behind them, threw the cloth or veil she carried over her head, and in some way that they did not see, suddenly extinguished the lamp.

Now they were in deep darkness, the darkness of death, and in utter silence, the silence of the dead. No glimmer of light, and yet to Alan it seemed as though he could feel the flash of the crystal eyes of Little Bonga, and of all the other eyes set in the masks of those departed men who had once been the husbands of the bloodstained priestess of the Asiki, till one by one, as she wearied of them, they were bewitched to madness and to doom. In that utter quiet he thought even that he could hear them stir within their winding sheets, or it may have been that the Asika had risen and moved among them

(Continued on page 21)