

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 Bonsa." 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 Bonsa, 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. Alan and Jeeki find themselves practically prisoners at Asika's mercy.

CHAPTER XXI.

SEEKING ESCAPE.



BUT Jeeki did not sleep, although he, too, lay down upon his bed. On the contrary, he remained wide awake and reflected, more deeply perhaps than he had ever done before, being sure that the superstition as to the dependence of Alan's life upon his own was now worn very thin, and that his hour was at hand. He thought of making Alan's wild attempt to depart impossible by the simple method of warning the Asika, but, notwithstanding his native selfishness, was too loyal to let that idea take root in his mind. No, there was nothing to be done; if the Major wished to start, the Major must start, and he, Jeeki, must pay the price.

Presently a figure emerged from the shadows into the faint light thrown by the single lamp that burned above, and though it was wrapped in a dark cloak Jeeki knew at once that it was not the Asika. Very stealthily the figure crept towards him as a leopard might creep, and bent down to examine him. The movement caused the cloak to slip a little, and for an instant Jeeki caught sight of the wasted, half-crazed face of the Mungana and of a long curved knife that glittered in his hand.

The Mungana watched him awhile, then, satisfied that he slept, turned round, and bending himself almost double, glided with infinite precautions towards Alan's bed, that stood some twelve or fourteen feet away. Silently as a snake that uncoils itself, Jeeki slipped from between his blankets and crept after him, his naked feet making no noise upon the mat-strewn floor.

Alan was lying on his back with his throat exposed, a very easy victim. For a moment the Mungana stared. Then he erected himself like a snake about to strike, and lifted the great curved knife, taking aim at the naked breast. Jeeki erected himself also, and even as the knife began to fall, with one hand he caught the arm that drove it and with the other the murderer's throat. The Mungana fought like a wild cat, but Jeeki was too strong for him.

It was at this juncture that Alan woke up and asked sleepily what was the matter.

"Nothing, Major," answered Jeeki in low but

cheerful tones. "Snake just going to bite you and I catch him, that all."

"Be careful, Jeeki, or you will kill the man," said Alan, recognising the Mungana, and taking in the situation.

"Why not, Major? He want kill you, and me too afterwards. Good riddance of bad rubbish, as Bible say."

"I am not so sure, Jeeki. Give him air and let me think. Tell him that if he makes any noise, he dies."

"Now, friend," said Alan in Asiki, "why did you wish to stab me?"

"Because I hate you," answered the man, "who to-morrow will take my place and the wife I love."

"As a year or two ago you took someone else's, eh? Well, suppose now that I don't want either your place or your wife."

"What would that matter even if it were true. White Man, since she wants you?"

"I am thinking, friend, that there is someone else she will want when she hears of this. How do you suppose that you will die to-morrow? Not so easily as you hope, perhaps."

"Supposing I make a bargain with you," went on Alan slowly. "Supposing I say: 'Mungana, show me the way out of this place, as you can, now at once. Or, if you prefer it, refuse and be given up to the Asika.'"

"Would you kill me afterwards?" he asked.

"Not I. Why should I wish to kill you?"

"I cannot believe you, White Man. It is not possible that you should wish to run away from so much love and glory, or to spare one who would have slain you."

"Jeeki," said Alan, "this fellow is mad; after all, I think you had better go to the door and shout for the priests."

"No, no, lord," begged the wretched creature, "I will trust you, I will try, though it is you who must be mad."

"Very good. Stand over him, Jeeki, while I put on my things, and—yes, give me that mask. If he stirs, kill him at once."

"No go," Jeeki muttered, "no go! If we get past priests, Asika catch us with her magic."

Alan sternly bade him be quiet and stop behind if he did not wish to come.

"No, no, Major," he answered, "I come all right. Asika very prejudiced beggar, and if she find me here alone—oh, my!"

"Follow me, White Man," said Mungana, "and if you desire to live, be silent. Throw your cloaks about your heads."

The Mungana went first down the stair. Jeeki followed, holding him by the arm with one hand while in the other he kept his own knife ready to stab him at the first sign of treachery.

Alan brought up the rear, keeping hold of Jeeki's cloak. They passed down twelve steps of stair, then turned to the right along a tunnel, then to the left, then to the right again. At length, quite of a sudden, they emerged into moonlight.

Alan looked about him and knew the place. It was where the feast had been held two months before, when the priests were poisoned and Big Bonsa chose the victims for sacrifice. Already it was prepared for the great festival of to-morrow when the Mungana should drown himself and Alan be married to the Asika. The moonlight shone on the glaring, deathly eyes of Big Bonsa, its fish-like snout and its huge, pale teeth. Alan looked at it and shivered, for the thing was horrid and uncanny.

The Mungana noticed his fear and whispered: "We must swim the water. If you have a god, White Man, pray him to protect you from Bonsa."

"Go on," answered Alan, "I do not dread a fetish, only the look of it. But is there no way round?"

The Mungana shook his head and began to enter the canal. Jeeki, whose teeth were chattering, hung back, but Alan pushed him from behind, so sharply that he stumbled and made a splash. Then Alan followed, and as the cold, black water rose to his chest, looked at Big Bonsa.

It seemed to him that the thing had turned round and was staring at them. Surely a few seconds ago its snout pointed the other way. No, that must be fancy. He was swimming now, they were all swimming, Alan and Jeeki holding their pistols and little stock of cartridges above their heads to keep them dry. The gold head of Big Bonsa appeared to be lifting itself up in the water, as a reptile might in

order to get a better view of these proceedings, but doubtless it was the ripples that they caused which gave it this appearance.

It was about ten yards off and they were in the middle of the canal. The Mungana had passed it; Jeeki had passed it. It was in a line with Alan's head. Oh Heavens! a sudden smother of foam, a rush like that of a torpedo, and set low down between two curving waves, a flash of gold. Then a gurgling, inhuman laugh, and a weight upon his back. Down went Alan, down and down!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE END OF THE MUNGANA.

The moonlight above vanished. Alan was alone in the depths with this devil, or whatever it might be. He could feel hands and feet gripping and treading on him, but they did not seem to be human, for there were too many of them. Also they were very cold. He gave himself up for dead, and thought of Barbara.

Then something flashed into his mind. In his hand he still held the revolver. He pressed it against the thing that was smothering him, and pulled the trigger. Again he pulled it, and again, for it was a self-cocking weapon, and even there deep down in the water he heard the thud of the explosion of the damp-proof copper cartridges. His lungs were bursting, his senses reeled; only enough of them remained to tell him that he was free of that strangling grip and floating upwards. His head rose above the surface, and through the mouth of his mask he drew in the sweet air with great gasps. Down below him in the clear water he saw the yellow head of Big Bonsa rocking and quivering like a great reflected moon, saw too that it was beginning to rise. Yet he could not swim away from it, the thing seemed to have hypnotised him. He heard Jeeki calling to him from the shallow water near the further bank, but still he floated there like a log staring down at Big Bonsa beneath.

Jeeki plunged back into the canal, and with a few strong strokes reached him, gripped him by the arm, and began to tow him to the shore. Before they came there Big Bonsa rose like a huge fish and tried to follow them, but could not, or so it seemed. At any rate, it only whirled round and round upon the surface, while from it poured a white fluid that turned the water to the hue of milk.

"What is it, Jeeki?" he said with an idiotic laugh. "What is it?"

"Oh! don't know. Devil and all, p'r'aps. Come on, Major, before it catch us."

"I don't think it will catch anyone just at present. Devil or not, hollow-nosed bullets don't agree with it. Shall I give it another, Jeeki?" and he lifted the pistol.

"No, no, Major, don't play tomfool," and Jeeki grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away.

A few paces further on stood the Mungana like a man transfixed, and even then Alan noticed that he regarded him with something akin to awe.

"Stronger than the god," he muttered, "stronger than the god," and bounded forward.

Following the path that ran beside the canal, they plunged into a tunnel, holding each other as before. In a few minutes they were through it and in a place full of cedar trees outside the wall of the Gold House, under which evidently the tunnel passed, for there it rose behind them. Three men appeared to cut off their retreat.

The Mungana slackened his speed and said one word—"Finished!" and Jeeki also hesitated, then turned and pointed behind them.

Alan looked back, and flitting in and out between the cedar trees saw the white robes of the priests of Bonsa. Then despair seized them all, and they rushed at the bridge. Jeeki reached it first, and dodging beneath the spears of the two guards, plunged his knife into the breast of one of them, and butted the other with his great head, so that he fell over the side of the bridge on to the rocks below.

"Cut, Major, cut!" he said to Alan, who pushed past him. "All right now."

They were on the narrow swaying bridge—it was but a single plank—Alan first, then the Mungana, then Jeeki. When they were half way across Alan looked before him, and saw a sight he could never forget.

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