

The Yellow God

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"Well, Jeeki," said Alan, bursting into such a roar of laughter that he nearly shook off his mask, when he found that the carpenters intended to make a coffin for Jeeki, "you had better be careful, for you just told me that the Asika never changes her mind. Say to this man that he must tell the Asika there is a mistake, that however much I should like to oblige her, I can't bury you because it has been prophesied to me that on the day you are buried, I shall be buried also, and that therefore you must be kept alive."

"Capital notion, that, Major," said Jeeki, much relieved. "She not want bury you just at present."

This slight misconception having been disposed of, they explained to the carpenters what was wanted. First, all the gold was emptied out of the sacks in which it remained as the priests had brought it, and divided into heaps, each of which weighed about forty pounds, a weight that with its box Alan considered would be a good load for a porter. Of these heaps there proved to be fifty-three, their total value, Alan reckoned, amounting to about £100,000 sterling. Then the carpenters were set to work to make a model box which they did quickly enough and with great ingenuity, cutting the wood with their native saws, dove-tailing it as a civilised craftsman would do, and finally securing it everywhere with ebony pegs, driven into holes which they bored with a hot iron.

This box-making went on for two whole days. As each of them was filled and pegged down, the gold within being packed in sawdust to keep it from rattling, Alan amused himself in adding an address with a feather brush and a supply of red paint such as the Asiki priests used to decorate their bodies. At first he was puzzled to know what address to put, but finally decided upon the following:

"Major A. Vernon, c.o. Miss Champers, The Court, near Kingswell, England," adding in the corner, "From A. V., Asiki-land, Africa."

Then he bethought him of writing a letter, but was obliged to abandon the idea, as he had neither pen, pencil, ink nor paper. Whatever arts remained to them, that of any form of writing was totally unknown to the Asiki. Even in the days when they had wrapped up the Egyptian, the Roman, and other early Munganas in sheets of gold and set them in their treasure-house, they had no knowledge of it, for not even an hieroglyphic or a rune appeared upon the imperishable metal shrouds. Still, Alan did something, for obtaining a piece of white wood, which he smoothed as well as he was able with a knife, he painted on it this message:

"Messrs. Aston, Old Calabar. Please forward accompanying fifty-three packages, or as many as arrive, and cable as follows. All costs will be remitted. 'Champers. Kingswell, England. Prisoner among Asika. No present prospect of escape, but hope for best. Jeeki and I well. Allowed send this with gold, but perhaps no future message possible. Good-bye. Alan.'"

As it happened, just as Alan was finishing this scrawl with a sad heart, he heard a movement, and glancing up, perceived standing at his side the Asika, of whom he had seen nothing since the interview when she had beaten Jeeki.

"What are those marks that you

make upon the board, Vernoon?" she asked suspiciously.

With the assistance of Jeeki, who kept at a respectful distance, he informed her that they were a message in writing to tell the white men at the coast to forward the gold to his starving family.

"Oh!" she said, "I never heard of writing. You shall teach it me. It will serve to pass the time till we are married, though it will not be of much use afterwards, as we shall never be separated any more, and words are better than marks upon a board. But," she added cheerfully, "I can send away this black dog of yours," and she looked at Jeeki, "and he can write to us. No, I cannot, for an accident might happen to him, and they tell me you say that if he dies, you die also, so he must stop here always. What have you in those little boxes?"

"The gold you gave me, Asika, packed in loads."

"A small gift enough," she answered contemptuously, "would you not like more, since you value that stuff? Well, another time you shall send all you want. Meanwhile the porters are waiting, fifty men and three, as you sent me word, and ten spare ones to take the place of any who die. But how they will find their way, I know not, since none of them have ever been to the coast."

An idea occurred to Alan, who had small faith in Jeeki's "Ma" as a messenger.

"The Ogula prisoners could show them," he said, "at any rate as far as the forest, and after that they could find out. May they not go, Asika?"

"If you will," she answered carelessly. "Let them be ready to start to-morrow, at the dawn, all except their chief, Fahni, who must stop here as a hostage. I do not trust those Ogula, who more than once have threatened to make war upon us," she added, then turned and bade the priests bring in the bearers to receive their instructions.

"Go where the white lord sends you," she said in an indifferent voice, "carrying with you these packages. I do not know where it is, but these man-eaters will show you some of the way, and if you fail in the business and live to come back again, you shall be sacrificed to Bonsa at the next feast; if you run away, then your wives and children shall be sacrificed. Food shall be given you for your journey, and gold to buy more when it is done. Now, Vernoon, tell them what they have to do."

So Alan, or rather Jeeki, told them, and these directions were so long and minute, that before they were finished Asika grew tired of listening and went away, saying as she passed the captain of the company:

"Remember my words, man, succeed or die, but of your land and its secrets say nothing."

"I hear," answered the captain, prostrating himself.

That night Alan summoned the Ogula and spoke to them through Jeeki in their own language. At first they declared that they would not leave their chief, preferring to stay and die with him.

"Not so," said Fahni, "go, my children, that I may live. Go and gather the tribe, all the thousands of them who are men and can fight, and bring them up to attack Asiki-land, to rescue me if I am still alive, or to avenge me if I am dead. As for those bearers, do them no harm, but send them on to the coast with the white man's goods."

So in the end the Ogula said that they would go, and when Alan woke up on the following morning, he was informed that they and the Asiki porters had already departed upon their journey. Then he dismissed the matter from his mind, for to tell the

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