



THE

YELLOW GOD

BY

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"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. Alan finally wins Barbara's promise to become his wife but their engagement is to be kept secret.

CHAPTER V.

BARBARA MAKES A SPEECH.



WHEN Sir Robert Aylward came down to luncheon he found Barbara, looking particularly radiant and charming, already presiding at that meal and conversing in her best French to the foreign gentlemen who were paying her compliments.

"Forgive me for being late," he said; "first of all I have been talking to your

uncle, and afterwards skimming through the articles in yesterday's papers on our little venture which comes out to-morrow. A cheerful occupation on the whole, for with one or two exceptions they are all favourable."

"Mon Dieu," said the French gentleman on the right, "seeing what they did cost, that is not strange. Your English papers they are so expensive; in Paris we have done it for half the money."

Barbara and some of the guests laughed outright, finding this frankness charming, and even Sir Robert smiled as he went on:

"But where have you been, Miss Champers? I thought that we were going to have a round of golf together. The caddies were there, I was there, the greens had been specially rolled this morning, but there was no you."

"No," she answered, "because Major Vernon and I walked to church and heard a very good sermon upon the observance of the Sabbath."

"You are severe," he said. "Do you think it wrong for men who work hard all the week to play a harmless game on Sunday?"

"Not at all, Sir Robert." Then she looked at him, and coming to a sudden decision, added, "If you like I will play you nine holes this afternoon and give you a stroke a hole, or would you prefer a foursome?"

"No, let us fight alone and let the best player win."

"Very well, Sir Robert, but you mustn't forget that I am handicapped."

"Don't look angry," she whispered to Alan as they strolled out into the garden after lunch, "I must clear things up and know what we have to face. I'll be back by tea-time, and we will have it out with my uncle."

The nine holes had been played, and by a single stroke Barbara had won the match, which pleased her very much, for she had done her best, and with such heavy odds in his favour Sir Robert, who had also done his best, was no mean opponent, even for a player of her skill. Indeed the fight had been quite earnest, for each party knew that it was but

a prelude to another and more serious fight, and looked upon the result as in some sense an omen.

"I am conquered," he said in a voice in which vexation struggled with a laugh, "and by a woman over whom I had an advantage. It is humiliating, for I confess I do not like being beaten."

"Don't you think that women generally win if they mean to?" asked Barbara. "I believe that when they fail, which is often enough, it is because they don't care, or can't make up their minds. A woman in earnest is a dangerous antagonist."

"Yes," he answered, "or the best of allies." Then he gave the clubs and half-a-crown to the caddies, and when they were out of hearing, added, "Miss Champers, I have been wondering for some time whether it is possible that you would become such an ally to me."

"I know nothing of business, Sir Robert, my tastes do not lie that way."

"You know well that I was not speaking of business, Miss Champers. I was speaking of another kind of partnership, that which Nature has ordained between men and women—marriage. Will you accept me as a husband?"

She opened her lips to speak, but he lifted his hand and went on. "Listen before you give that ready answer which it is so hard to recall, or smooth away. I know all my disadvantages, my years, which to you may seem many, my modest origin, my trade which, not altogether without reason, you despise and dislike. Well, the first cannot be changed except for the worse; the second can be, and already is, buried beneath the gold and ermine of wealth and titles. What does it matter if I am the son of a city clerk who never earned more than £2 a week and was born in a tenement at Battersea, when I am one of the rich men of this rich land and shall die a peer in a palace, leaving millions and honours to my children? As for the third, my occupation, I am prepared to give it up. It has served my turn, and after next week I shall have earned the amount that years ago I determined to earn. Thenceforth, set above the accidents of fortune, I propose to devote myself to higher aims, those of legitimate ambition. So far as my time would allow I have already taken some share in politics as a worker; I intend to continue in them as a ruler, which I still have the health and ability to do. I mean to be one of the first men in this Empire, to ride to power over the heads of all the nonentities whose only claim upon the confidence of their countrymen is that they were born in a certain class, with money in their pockets and without the need to spend the best of their manhood in work. With you at my side I can do all these things and more, and such is the future that I have to offer to you."

Again she would have broken in upon his speech, and again he stopped her, reading the unspoken answer on her lips.

"I have not told you all. Perhaps I have put first what should have come last. I have not told you that I love you earnestly and sincerely, with the settled, unalterable love that sometimes comes to men in middle-age who have never turned their thoughts that way before. I will not attempt the rhapsodies of passion which at my time of life might sound foolish or out of place; yet it is true that I am filled with this passion which has descended on me and taken possession of me. I, who often have laughed at such things in other men, adore you. You are a joy to my eyes. If you are not in the room, for me it is empty. I admire the uprightness of your character, and even your prejudices, and to your standard I desire to approximate my own. I think that no man can ever love you quite so well

as I do, Barbara Champers. Now speak, I am ready to meet the best or the worst."

After her fashion Barbara looked him straight in the face with her steady eyes, and answered gently enough, for the man's method of presenting his case, elaborate and prepared though it evidently was, had touched her.

"I fear it is the worst, Sir Robert. There are hundreds of women superior to myself in every way who would be glad to give you the help and companionship you ask, with their hearts thrown in. Choose one of them, for I cannot do so."

He heard, and for the first time his face broke as it were. All this while it had remained mask-like and immovable, even when he spoke of his love, but now it broke as ice breaks at the pressure of a sudden flood beneath, and she saw the depths and eddies of his nature and understood their strength. Not that he revealed them in speech, angry or pleading, for that remained calm and measured enough. She did not hear, she saw, and even then it was marvellous to her that a mere change in a man's expression could explain so much.

"Those are very cruel words," he said. "Are they unalterable?"

"Quite. I do not play in such matters, it would be wicked."

"May I ask you one question, for if the answer is in the negative, I shall still continue to hope? Do you care for any other man?"

Again she looked at him with her fearless eyes and answered:

"Yes, I am engaged to another man."

"To Alan Vernon?"

She nodded.

"When did this happen? Some years ago?"

"No, this morning."

"Great Heavens!" he muttered in a hoarse voice, turning his head away. "This morning. Then last night it might not have been too late, and last night I should have spoken to you. I had arranged it all. Yes, if it had not been for the story of that accursed fetish and your uncle's illness, I should have spoken to you, and perhaps succeeded."

"I think not," she said.

He turned upon her, and notwithstanding the tears in his eyes, they burned like fire.

"You think—you think," he gasped, "but I know. Of course after this morning it was impossible. But, Barbara, I say that I will win you yet. I have never failed in any object that I set before myself, and do not suppose that I shall fail in this. Although in a way I liked and respected him, I have always felt that Vernon was my enemy, one destined to bring grief and loss upon me, even if he did not intend so to do. Now I understand why, and he shall learn that I am stronger than he. God help him! I say."

"I think He will," Barbara answered calmly. "You are speaking wildly, and I understand the reason, and hope that you will forget your words; but whether you forget or remember, do not suppose that you frighten me. You men who have made money," she went on with swelling indignation, "who have made money somehow, and have bought honours with the moneys somehow, think yourselves great, and in your little day, your little, little day that will end with three lines in small type in 'The Times,' you are great. You can buy what you want, and people creep round you and ask you for doles and favours, and railway porters call you 'my lord' at every other step. But you forget your limitations in this world, and that which lies above you. You say you will do this and that. You should study a book which few of you ever read, where it tells you that you do not know what you will be on the morrow; that your life is even as a vapour appearing for a little time and then vanishing away. You