

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.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FEAST OF LITTLE BONSA.



It was the night of full moon, and of the great feast of the return of Little Bonsa. Alan sat in his chamber waiting to be summoned to take part in the ceremony and listening the while to that *Wow! Wow! Wow!* of the death drums, whereof Jeeki had once spoken in England, which could be clearly heard even above the perpetual boom of the cataract tumbling down its cliff behind the town. By now he had recovered from the fatigues of his journey, and his health was good, but the same could not be said of his spirits, for never in his life had he felt more downhearted, not even when he was sickening for the blackwater fever, or lay in bondage in the city, expecting every morning to wake up and find his reputation blasted. He was a prisoner in this dreadful, gloomy place, where he must live like a second Man in the Iron Mask, without recreation or exercise other than he could find in the walled garden where grew the black cedar trees, and, so far as he could see, a prisoner without hope of escape.

Moreover, he could no longer disguise from himself the truth; Jeeki was right. The Asika had fallen in love with him, or at any rate made up her mind that he should be her next husband. He hated the sight of the woman and her sinuous, evil beauty, but to be free of her was impossible, and to offend her, death. All day long she kept him about her, and from his sleep he would wake up, and, as on the night of his arrival, distinguish her leaning over him, studying his face by the light of the faintly-burning lamps, as a snake studies the bird it is about to strike. He dared not stir or give the slightest sign that he saw her. Nor, indeed, did he always see her, for he kept his eyes closely shut. But even in his heaviest slumber some warning sense told him of her presence, and then above Jeeki's snores (for on these occasions Jeeki always snored his loudest) he would hear a soft foot-fall, as, cat-like, she crept towards him, or the sweep of her spangled robe, or the tinkling of the scales of her golden breastplate. For a long while she would stand there, examining him greedily, and even the few little belongings that remained to him, and then with a hungry sigh glide away and vanish in the shadows. How she came or how she vanished Alan could not discover. Clearly she did not use the door, and he could find no other entrance to the room. Indeed, at times he thought that he must be suffering from delusion, but Jeeki shook his great head and did not agree with him.

"She there right enough," he said. "She walk over me as though I log, and I smell stuff she put on her hair, but I think she come and go by magic. Asika do that if she please."

"Then I wish she would teach me the secret, Jeeki. I should soon be out of Asika-land, I can tell you."

All that day Alan had been in her company, answering questions about his past, the lands that he had visited, and especially the women that he had known. He had the tact to tell her that none of these were half so beautiful as she was, which was true in a sense, and pleased her very much, for in whatever respects she differed from them, in common with the rest of her sex, she loved a compliment. Emboldened by her good humour, he had ventured to suggest that, being rested and having restored Little Bonsa, he would be glad to return with her gifts to his own country. Next instant he was sorry, for as soon as she understood his meaning she grew almost white with rage.

"What!" she said, "you desire to leave me? Know, Vernoon, that I will see you dead first, and myself also, for then we shall be born again together, and can never more be separated."

Nor was this all, for she burst into weeping, threw her arms about him, drew him to her, kissed him on the forehead, and then thrust him away, saying:

"Curses on this priests' law that makes us wait so long, and curses on that Mungana, who will not die and may not be killed. Well, he shall pay for it, and within two months, Vernoon, oh! within two months—" and she stretched out her arms with a gesture of infinite passion, then turned and left him.

"My!" said Jeeki afterwards, for he had watched all this scene open-mouthed, "my! but she mean business. Mrs. Jeeki never kiss me like that, nor any other female either. She dead nuts on you, Major. Very great compliment! 'Spect when you Mungana, she keep you alive a long time, four or five years perhaps, if no other white man come this way. Pity you can't take it on a bit, Major," he added insidiously, "because then she grow careless and make you chief, and we get chance scoop out that gold house and bolt with bally lot. Miss Barbara sensible woman. She see all that cash she not mind, she say, 'Bravo, old boy, quite right spoil Lady Potiphar in land of bondage, but Jeeki must have ten per cent., because he show you how do it.'"

Alan was so depressed, and, indeed, terrified by this demonstration on the part of his fearful hostess, that he could neither laugh at Jeeki nor swear at him. He only sat still and groaned, feeling that bad as things were they were bound to become worse.

Above the perpetual booming of the death drums rose a sound of wild music. The door burst open, and through it came a number of priests, their nearly naked bodies hideously painted, and on their heads the most devilish-looking masks. Some of them clashed cymbals, some blew horns, and some beat little drums, all to time, which was given to them by a bandmaster with a golden rod. In front of them, with painted face and decked in his gorgeous apparel, walked the Mungana himself.

"They come to take us to Bonsa worship," explained Jeeki. "Cheer up, Major, very exciting business, no go to sleep there, as in English church. See god all time and no sermon."

Alan, who wore a linen robe over the remains of his European garments, and whose mask was already on his head, rose listlessly and bowed to the gorgeous Mungana, who, poor man, answered him with a stare of hate, knowing that this wanderer was destined to fill his place. Then they started, Jeeki accompanying them, and walked a long way through various halls and passages, bearing first to the left and then to the right again, till suddenly through some side door they emerged upon a marvellous scene. The first impressions that reached Alan's mind were those of a long stretch of water, very black and still, and not more than eighty feet in width. On the hither edge of this canal, seated upon a raised dais in the midst of a great open space of polished rock, was the Asika, or so he gathered from her gold breastplate and sparkling garments, for her fierce and beautiful features were hid beneath an object familiar enough to him, the yellow, crystal-eyed mask of Little Bonsa. Arranged in companies about and behind her were hundreds of

people, male and female, clad in hideous costumes to resemble demons, with masks to match. Some of these masks were semi-human, and some of them bore a likeness to the heads of animals, and had horns on them, while their wearers were adorned with skins and tails. To describe them in their infinite variety would be impossible; indeed, the recollection that Alan carried away was one of a mediæval hell, as it is occasionally to be found portrayed upon "Doom pictures" in old churches.

On the further side of the water the entire Asiki people seemed to be gathered; at least, there were thousands of them seated upon a rising, rocky slope as in an amphitheatre, clad only in the ordinary costume of the West African native, and in some instances in linen cloaks. This great amphitheatre was surrounded by a high wall with gates, but in the moonlight he found it difficult to discern its exact limits.

Jeeki nudged Alan and pointed to the centre of the canal or pool. He looked and saw floating there a huge and hideous golden head, twenty times as large as life, perhaps, with great prominent eyes that glared up to the sky. Its appearance was quite unlike anything else in the world, more loathsome, more horrible; man, fish and animal, all seemed to have their part in it, human hair and teeth, fish-like eyes, and stout, bestial expression.

"Big Bonsa," whispered Jeeki. "Just the same as when I sweet little boy. He live there for thousands of years."

Preceded by the Mungana, and followed by Jeeki and the priests, the band bringing up the rear, Alan was marched down a lane left open for him till he came to some steps leading to the dais, upon which, in addition to that occupied by the Asika, stood two empty chairs. These steps the Mungana motioned to him to mount, but when Jeeki tried to follow him he turned and struck him contemptuously in the face. At once the Asika, who was watching Vernoon's approach through the eye-holes in the Little Bonsa mask, said fiercely:

"Who bade you strike the servant of my guest, O Mungana? Let him come also, that he may stand behind us and interpret."

Her wretched husband, who knew that this public slight was put upon him purposely, but did not dare to protest against it, bowed his head. Then all three of them climbed to the dais, the priests and the musicians remaining below.

"Welcome, Vernoon," said the Asika through the lips of the mask, which to Alan, notwithstanding the dreadful cruelty of its expression, looked less hateful than the lovely, tigrish face it hid. "Welcome, and be seated here on my left hand, since on my right you may not sit—as yet."

He bowed and took the chair to which she pointed, while her husband placed himself in the other chair upon her right, and Jeeki stood behind, his great shape towering above them all.

"This is a festival of my people, Vernoon," she went on, "such a festival as has not been seen for years, celebrated because Little Bonsa has come back to them."

"What is to happen?" he asked uneasily. "I have told you, Lady, that blood is *orunda* to me. I must not witness it."

"I know, be not afraid," she answered. "Sacrifice there must be, since it is the custom and we may not defraud the gods, but you shall not see the deed. Judge from this, Vernoon, how greatly I desire to please you."

Now Alan, looking about him, saw that immediately beneath the dais and between them and the edge of the water, were gathered his cannibal friends, the Ogula and Fahni, their chief, who had rowed him to Asika-land, and with them the messengers whom they had sent on ahead. Also he saw that their arms were tied behind them, and that they were guarded by men dressed like devils and armed with spears.

"Ask Fahni why he and his people are bound, Jeeki," said Alan, "and why they have not returned to their own country."

Jeeki obeyed, putting the question in the Ogula language, whereon the poor men turned and began to implore Alan to save their lives, Fahni adding that he had been told they were to be killed that night.

"Why are these men to be slain?" asked Alan of the Asika.

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