



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. Changers-Haswell, promoters of Sahara, Limited, because the editor of "The Judge" has informed him of the company's dishonourable 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.

CHAPTER III.

JEIKI TELLS A TALE.



HE Court, Mr. Changers-Haswell's place, was a very fine house indeed, of a sort. That is, it contained twenty-nine bedrooms, each of them with a bathroom attached, a large number of sitting-rooms, ample garages, stables and offices, the whole surrounded by several acres of newly-planted gardens. Incidentally it may be mentioned that it was built in the most atrocious taste, and looked like a suburban villa seen through a magnifying glass.

It was in this matter of taste that it differed from Sir Robert Aylward's home, Old Hall, a few miles away. Not that this was old either, for the original house had fallen down or been burnt a hundred years before. But Sir Robert, being gifted with artistic perception, had reared up in place of it a smaller but really beautiful dwelling of soft grey stone, long and low, and built in the Tudor style with many gables.

This house, charming as it was, could not of course compare with Yarleys, the ancient seat of the Vernons in the same neighbourhood. Yarleys was pure Elizabethan, although it contained an oak-roofed hall which was said to date back to the time of King John, a remnant of a former house. There were no electric light or other modern conveniences at Yarleys, yet it was a place that everyone went to see because of its exceeding beauty and its historical associations.

But it is with the Court that we have to do at present, not with Yarleys. Mr. Changers-Haswell had a week-end party. There were ten guests, all men, and with the exception of Alan, who, it will be remembered, was one of them, all rich and in business. They included two French bankers and three Jews, everyone a prop of the original Sahara Syndicate, and keenly interested in the forthcoming flotation.

Alan did not come until it was time to dress for dinner, for he knew that Barbara would not appear before that meal, and it was her society he sought, not that of his host or fellow guests. Accompanied by his negro servant, Jeeki, for in a house like this it was necessary to have someone to wait upon him, he drove over from Yarleys, a distance of ten miles, arriving about eight o'clock.

"Mr. Haswell has gone up to dress, Major, and so have the other gentlemen," said the head butler, Mr. Smith, "but Miss Changers told me to give you this note and to say that dinner is at half-past eight."

Alan took the note and asked to be shown to his room. Once there, although he had only five and twenty minutes, he opened it eagerly, while Jeeki unpacked his bag.

"Dear Alan," it ran, "don't be late for dinner or I may not be able to keep a place next to me. Of course Sir Robert takes me in. They are a worse lot than usual this time, odious—odious!—and I can't stand one on the left hand as well as on the right.—Yours, B."

"P.S.—What have you been doing? Our distinguished guests, to say nothing of my uncle, seem

to be in a great fuss about you. I overheard them talking when I was pretending to arrange some flowers. One of them called you a sanctimonious prig and obstinate donkey, and another answered—I think it was Sir Robert—'No doubt, but obstinate donkeys can kick and have been known to upset other people's apple-carts ere now.' Is the Sahara Syndicate the apple-cart? If so, I'll forgive you."

"P.P.S.—Remember that we will walk to church together to-morrow, but come down to breakfast in knickerbockers or something to put them off, and I'll do the same—I mean I'll dress as if I were going to play golf. We can turn out Christians later. If we don't—dress like that I mean—they'll guess and all want to come to church, except the Jews, which would bring the judgment of heaven on us."

"P.P.P.S.—Don't be careless and leave this note lying about, for the under-footman who waits upon you reads all the letters. He steams them over a kettle. Smith the butler is the only respectable man in this house."

Alan laughed outright as he finished this peculiar and outspoken epistle, which somehow revived his spirits that, since the previous day, had been low enough. It refreshed him. It was like a breath of frosty air from an open window blowing clean and cold into a scented, over-heated room. He would have liked to keep it, but remembering Barbara's injunctions and the under-footman, threw it into the fire and watched it burn. Jeeki coughed to intimate that it was time for his master to dress, and Alan turned and looked at him in an absent-minded fashion.

He was worth looking at, was Jeeki. Let the reader imagine a very tall and powerfully-built negro with a skin as black as a well-polished boot, woolly hair as white as snow, a little tufted beard also white, a hand like a leg of mutton, but with long delicate fingers and pink filbert shaped nails, an immovable countenance, but set in it, beneath a massive brow, two extraordinarily humorous and eloquent black eyes, which expressed every emotion passing through the brain behind them—that is, when their owner chose to allow them to do so. Such was Jeeki.

"Shall I unlace your boots, Major?" he said, in his full, melodious voice, and speaking the most perfect English. "I expect that the gong will sound in nine and a half minutes."

"Then let it sound, and be hanged to it," answered Alan. "No, I forgot—I must hurry. Jeeki, put that fire out, and open all the windows as soon as I go down. This room is like a hot-house."

"Yes, Major."

The guests were gathered in the hall drinking sherry and bitters, a proceeding that to Alan's mind set a stamp upon the house. His host, Mr. Changers-Haswell, came forward and greeted him with much affectionate enthusiasm, and Alan noticed that he looked very pale, also that his thoughts seemed to be wandering, for he introduced a French banker to him as a noted Jew, and the noted Jew as the French banker, although the distinction between them was obvious, and the gentlemen concerned evidently resented the mistake. Sir Robert Aylward, catching sight of him, came across the hall in his usual direct fashion, and shook him by the hand.

"Glad to see you, Vernon," he said, fixing his piercing eyes upon Alan as though he were trying to read his thoughts. "Pleasant change this from the city, and all that eternal business, isn't it?"

Then a French gentleman on Alan's left, having discovered that he was the engineer who had formulated the great flooding scheme, began to address him as "Cher maitre," speaking so rapidly in his own language that Alan, whose French was none of the best, struggled after him in vain. Whilst he was trying to answer a question which he did not

understand, the door at the end of the hall opened, and through it appeared Barbara Changers.

It was a large hall, and she was a long way off, which caused her to look small, who indeed was only of middle height. Yet even at that distance it was impossible to mistake the dignity of her appearance. A slim woman with brown hair, cheerful brown eyes, a well-modelled face, a rounded figure and an excellent complexion, such was Barbara. Ten thousand young ladies could be found as good, or even better looking, yet something about her differentiated her from the majority of her sex. There was determination in her step, and overflowing health and vigour in her every movement. Her eyes had a trick of looking straight into any other eyes they met, not boldly, but with a kind of virginal fearlessness and enterprise that people often found embarrassing. Indeed, she was extremely virginal and devoid of the usual fringe of feminine airs and graces, a nymph of the woods and waters, who although she was three and twenty, as yet recked little of men save as companions whom she liked or disliked according to her instincts.

"How do you do? Why did you not come over at lunch time? I wanted to play a round of golf with you this afternoon," she said to Alan.

Alan answered something about being busy at Yarleys.

"Yarleys!" she replied. "I thought that you lived in the city now, making money out of speculations, like everyone else that I know."

"Why, Miss Changers," broke in Sir Robert reproachfully, "I asked you to play a round of golf before tea and you would not."

"No," she answered, "because I was waiting for my cousin. We are better matched, Sir Robert."

There was something in her voice, usually so soft and pleasant, as she spoke these words, something of steeliness and defiance, that caused Alan to feel at once happy and uncomfortable.

"Thank goodness, there is dinner at last. Sir Robert, will you take me in, and Alan, will you sit on the other side of me? My uncle will show the rest their places."

The meal was long and magnificent; the price of each dish of it would have kept a poor family for a month, and on the cost of the exquisite wines they might have lived for a year or two. Also the last were well patronised by everyone except Barbara, who drank water, and Alan, who since his severe fever took nothing but weak whiskey and soda and a little claret.

"What is the row, Alan? Tell me, I can't wait any longer?"

"I have quarrelled with them," he answered, staring at his mutton as though he were criticising it. "I mean, I have left the firm and have nothing more to do with the business."

"Glad of it. Best news I have heard for many a day. But, then, may I ask why you are here?"

"I came to see you," he replied humbly—"thought perhaps you wouldn't mind."

"Now that you are really clear of it, I am going for them," she said presently. "I have only restrained myself for your sake."

"Sir Robert Aylward," said Barbara in that clear, carrying voice of hers, "will you, as an expert, instruct a very ignorant person? I want a little information."

"Miss Changers," he answered, "am I not always at your service?"

"Sir Robert," she went on calmly, "everyone here is, I believe, what is called a financier, that is, except myself and Major Vernon, who only tries to be and will, I am sure, fail, since Nature made him something else, a soldier and—what else did Nature make you, Alan?"

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