The Yellow God

By

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AN IDOL OF AFRICA

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CHAPTER I

SAHARA LIMITED

Sir Robert Aylward, Bart., M.P., sat in his office in the City of London. It was a very magnificent office, quite one of the finest that could be found within half a mile of the Mansion House. Its exterior was built of Aberdeen granite, a material calculated to impress the prospective investor with a comfortable sense of security. Other stucco, or even brick-built, offices might crumble and fall in an actual or a financial sense, but this rock-like edifice of granite, surmounted by a life-sized statue of Justice with her scales, admired from either corner by pleasing effigies of Commerce and of Industry, would surely endure any shock. Earthquake could scarcely shake its strong foundations; panic and disaster would as soon affect the Bank of England. That at least was the impression which it had been designed to convey, and not without success.

"There is so much in externals," Mr. Champers-Haswell, Sir Robert's partner, would say in his cheerful voice. "We are all of us influenced by them, however unconsciously. Impress the public, my dear Aylward. Let solemnity without suggest opulence within, and the bread, or rather the granite, which you throw upon the waters will come back to you after many days."

Mr. Aylward, for this conversation occurred before his merits or the

depth of his purse had been rewarded by a baronetcy, looked at his partner in the impassive fashion for which he was famous, and answered:

"You mix your metaphors, Haswell, but if you mean that the public are fools who must be caught by advertisement, I agree with you. Only this particular advertisement is expensive and I do not want to wait many days for my reward. However, £20,000 one way or the other is a small matter, so tell that architect to do the thing in granite."

Sir Robert Aylward sat in his own quiet room at the back of this enduring building, a very splendid room that any Secretary of State might have envied, but arranged in excellent taste. Its walls were panelled with figured teak, a rich carpet made the footfall noiseless, an antique Venus stood upon a marble pedestal in the corner, and over the mantelpiece hung a fine portrait by Gainsborough, that of a certain Miss Aylward, a famous beauty in her day, with whom, be it added, its present owner could boast no connection whatsoever.

Sir Robert was seated at his ebony desk playing with a pencil, and the light from a cheerful fire fell upon his face.

In its own way it was a remarkable face, as he appeared then in his fourth and fortieth year; very pale but with a natural pallor, very well cut and on the whole impressive. His eyes were dark, matching his black hair and pointed beard, and his nose was straight and rather prominent. Perhaps the mouth was his weakest feature, for there was a certain

shiftiness about it, also the lips were thick and slightly sensuous. Sir Robert knew this, and therefore he grew a moustache to veil them somewhat. To a careful observer the general impression given by this face was such as is left by the sudden sight of a waxen mask. "How strong! How lifelike!" he would have said, "but of course it isn't real. There may be a man behind, or there may be wood, but that's only a mask." Many people of perception had felt like this about Sir Robert Aylward, namely, that under the mask of his pale countenance dwelt a different being whom they did not know or appreciate.

If these had seen him at this moment of the opening of our story, they might have held that Wisdom was justified of her children. For now in the solitude of his splendid office, of a sudden Sir Robert's mask seemed to fall from him. His face broke up like ice beneath a thaw. He rose from his table and began to walk up and down the room. He talked to himself aloud.

"Great Heavens!" he muttered, "what a game to have played, and it will go through. I believe that it will go through."

He stopped at the table, switched on an electric light and made a rapid calculation on the back of a letter with a blue pencil.

"Yes," he said, "that's my share, a million and seventeen thousand pounds in cash, and two million in ordinary shares which can be worked off at a discount--let us say another seven hundred and fifty thousand,

plus what I have got already--put that at only two hundred and fifty thousand net. Two millions in all, which of course may or may not be added to, probably not, unless the ordinaries boom, for I don't mean to speculate any more. That's the end of twenty years' work, Robert Aylward. And to think of it, eighteen months ago, although I seemed so rich, I was on the verge of bankruptcy--the very verge, not worth five thousand pounds. Now what did the trick? I wonder what did the trick?"

He walked down the room and stopped opposite the ancient marble, staring at it--

"Not Venus, I think," he said, with a laugh, "Venus never made any man rich." He turned and retraced his steps to the other end of the room, which was veiled in shadow. Here upon a second marble pedestal stood an object that gleamed dimly through the gloom. It was about ten inches or a foot high, but in that place nothing more could be seen of it, except that it was yellow and had the general appearance of a toad. For some reason it seemed to attract Sir Robert Aylward, for he halted to stare at it, then stretched out his hand and switched on another lamp, in the hard brilliance of which the thing upon the pedestal suddenly declared itself, leaping out of the darkness into light. It was a terrible object, a monstrosity of indeterminate sex and nature, but surmounted by a woman's head and face of extraordinary, if devilish loveliness, sunk back between high but grotesquely small shoulders, like to those of a lizard, so that it glared upwards. The workmanship of the thing was rude yet strangely powerful. Whatever there is cruel, whatever there

is devilish, whatever there is inhuman in the dark places of the world, shone out of the jewelled eyes which were set in that yellow female face, yellow because its substance was of gold, a face which seemed not to belong to the embryonic legs beneath, for body there was none, but to float above them. A hollow, life-sized mask with two tiny frog-like legs, that was the fashion of it.

"You are an ugly brute," muttered Sir Robert, contemplating this effigy, "but although I believe in nothing in heaven above or earth below, except the abysmal folly of the British public, I am bothered if I don't believe in you. At any rate from the day when Vernon brought you into my office, my luck turned, and to judge from the smile on your sweet countenance, I don't think it is done with yet. I wonder what those stones are in your eyes. Opals, I suppose, from the way they change colour. They shine uncommonly to-day, I never remember them so bright. I----"

At this moment a knock came on the door. Sir Robert turned off the lamp and walked back to the fireplace.

"Come in," he said, and as he spoke once more his pale face grew impassive and expressionless.

The door opened and a clerk entered, an imposing-looking clerk with iron-grey hair, who wore an irreproachable frock coat and patent leather boots. Advancing to his master, he stood respectfully silent, waiting to

be addressed. For quite a long while Sir Robert looked over his head as though he did not see him; it was a way of his. Then his eyes rested on the man dreamily and he remarked in his cold, clear voice:

"I don't think I rang, Jeffreys."

"No, Sir Robert," answered the clerk, bowing as though he spoke to Royalty, "but there is a little matter about that article in The Cynic."

"Press business," said Sir Robert, lifting his eyebrows; "you should know by this time that I do not attend to such details. See Mr. Champers-Haswell, or Major Vernon."

"They are both out at the moment, Sir Robert."

"Go on, then, Jeffreys," replied the head of the firm with a resigned sigh, "only be brief. I am thinking."

The clerk bowed again.

"The Cynic people have just telephoned through about that article we sent them. I think you saw it, sir, and you may remember it begins----" and he read from a typewritten copy in his hand which was headed "Sahara Limited":

"'We are now privileged to announce that this mighty scheme which will turn a desert into a rolling sea bearing the commerce of nations and cause the waste places of the earth to teem with population and to blossom like the rose, has been completed in its necessary if dull financial details and will within a few days be submitted to investors among whom it has already caused so much excitement. These details we will deal with fully in succeeding articles, and therefore now need only pause to say that the basis of capitalization strikes us as wonderfully advantageous to the fortunate public who are asked to participate in its vast prospective prosperity. Our present object is to speak of its national and imperial aspects----'"

Sir Robert lifted his eyes in remonstrance:

"How much more of that exceedingly dull and commonplace puff do you propose to read, Jeffreys?" he asked.

"No more, Sir Robert. We are paying The Cynic thirty guineas to insert this article, and the point is that they say that if they have to put in the 'national and imperial' business they must have twenty more."

"Indeed, Jeffreys? Why?"

"Because, Sir Robert--I will tell you, as you always like to hear the truth--their advertisement-editor is of opinion that Sahara Limited is a national and imperial swindle. He says that he won't drag the nation and

the empire into it in an editorial under fifty guineas."

A faint smile flickered on Sir Robert's face.

"Does he, indeed?" he asked. "I wonder at his moderation. Had I been in his place I should have asked more, for really the style is a little flamboyant. Well, we don't want to quarrel with them just now--feed the sharks. But surely, Jeffreys, you didn't come to disturb me about such a trifle?"

"Not altogether, Sir Robert. There is something more important. The Daily Judge not only declines to put any article whatsoever, but refuses our advertisement, and states that it means to criticize the prospectus trenchantly."

"Ah!" said his master after a moment's thought, "that is rather serious, since people believe in the Judge even when it is wrong. Offer them the advertisement at treble rates."

"It has been done, sir, and they still refuse."

Sir Robert walked to the corner of the room where the yellow object squatted on its pedestal, and contemplated it a while, as a man often studies one thing when he is thinking of another. It seemed to give him an idea, for he looked over his shoulder and said:

"That will do, Jeffreys. When Major Vernon comes in, give him my compliments and say that I should be obliged by a word or two with him."

The clerk bowed and went as noiselessly as he had entered.

"Let's see," added Sir Robert to himself. "Old Jackson, the editor of The Judge, was a great friend of Vernon's father, the late Sir William Vernon, G.C.B. I believe that he was engaged to be married to his sister years ago, only she died or something. So the Major ought to be able to get round him if anybody can. Only the worst of it is I don't altogether trust that young gentleman. It suited us to give him a share in the business because he is an engineer who knows the country, and this Sahara scheme was his notion, a very good one in a way, and for other reasons. Now he shows signs of kicking over the traces, wants to know too much, is developing a conscience, and so forth. As though the promoters of speculative companies had any business with consciences. Ah! here he comes."

Sir Robert seated himself at his desk and resumed his calculations upon a half-sheet of note-paper, and that moment a clear, hearty voice was heard speaking to the clerks in the outer office. Then came the sound of a strong, firm footstep, the door opened and Major Alan Vernon appeared.

He was still quite a young man, not more than thirty-two or three years of age, though he lacked the ultra robust and rubicund appearance which is typical of so many Englishmen of his class at this period of life. A

heavy bout of blackwater fever acquired on service in West Africa, which would have killed anyone of weaker constitution, had robbed his face of its bloom and left it much sallower, if more interesting than once it had been. For in a way there was interest about the face; also a certain charm. It was a good and honest face with a rather eager, rather puzzled look, that of a man who has imagination and ideas and who searches for the truth but fails to find it. As for the charm, it lay for the most part in the pleasant, open smile and in the frank but rather round brown eyes overhung by a somewhat massive forehead which projected a little, or perhaps the severe illness already alluded to had caused the rest of the face to sink. Though thin, the man was bigly built, with broad shoulders and well-developed limbs, measuring a trifle under six feet in height.

Such was the outward appearance of Alan Vernon. As for his mind, it was able enough in certain fashions, for instance those of engineering, and the soldier-like faculties to which it had been trained; frank and kindly also, but in other respects not quick, perhaps from its unsuspiciousness. Alan Vernon was a man slow to discover ill and slower still to believe in it even when it seemed to be discovered, a weakness that may have gone far to account for his presence in the office of those eminent and brilliant financiers, Messrs. Aylward & Champers-Haswell. Just now he looked a little worried, like a fish out of water, or rather a fish which has begun to suspect the quality of the water, something in its smell or taste.

"Jeffreys tells me that you want to see me, Sir Robert," he said in his low and pleasant voice, looking at the baronet rather anxiously.

"Yes, my dear Vernon, I wish to ask you to do something, if you kindly will, although it is not quite in your line. Old Jackson, the editor of The Judge, is a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"He was a friend of my father's, and I used to know him slightly."

"Well, that's near enough. As I daresay you have heard, he is an unreasonable old beggar, and has taken a dislike to our Sahara scheme. Someone has set him against it and he refuses to receive advertisements, threatens criticisms, etc. Now the opposition of The Judge or any other paper won't kill us, and if necessary we can fight, but at the same time it is always wise to agree with your enemy while he is in the way, and in short--would you mind going down and explaining his mistake to him?"

Before answering Major Vernon walked to the window leisurely and looked out.

"I don't like asking favours from family friends," he replied at length, "and, as you said, I think it isn't quite my line. Though of course if it has anything to do with the engineering possibilities, I shall be most happy to see him," he added, brightening.

"I don't know what it has to do with; that is what I shall be obliged if you will find out," answered Sir Robert with some asperity. "One can't divide a matter of this sort into watertight compartments. It is true that in so important a concern each of us has charge of his own division, but the fact remains that we are jointly and severally responsible for the whole. I am not sure that you bear this sufficiently in mind, my dear Vernon," he added with slow emphasis.

His partner moved quickly; it might almost have been said that he shivered, though whether the movement, or the shiver, was produced by the argument of joint and several liability or by the familiarity of the "my dear Vernon," remains uncertain. Perhaps it was the latter, since although the elder man was a baronet and the younger only a retired Major of Engineers, the gulf between them, as any one of discernment could see, was wide. They were born, lived, and moved in different spheres unbridged by any common element or impulse.

"I think that I do bear it in mind, especially of late, Sir Robert," answered Alan Vernon slowly.

His partner threw a searching glance on him, for he felt that there was meaning in the words, but only said:

"That's all right. My motor is outside and will take you to Fleet Street in no time. Meanwhile you might tell them to telephone that you are coming, and perhaps you will just look in when you get back. I haven't

got to go to the House to-night, so shall be here till dinner time, and so, I think, will your cousin Haswell. Muzzle that old bulldog, Jackson, somehow. No doubt he has his price like the rest of them, in meal or malt, and you needn't stick at the figure. We don't want him hanging on our throat for the next week or two."

Ten minutes later the splendid, two-thousand guinea motor brougham drew up at the offices of the Judge and the obsequious motor-footman bowed Major Vernon through its rather grimy doorway. Within, a small boy in a kind of box asked his business, and when he heard his name, said that the "Guvnor" had sent down word that he was go up at once--third floor, first to the right and second to the left. So up he went, and when he reached the indicated locality was taken possession of by a worried-looking clerk who had evidently been waiting for him, and almost thrust through a door to find himself in a big, worn, untidy room. At a huge desk in this room sat an elderly man, also big, worn, and untidy-looking, who waved a long slip of galley-proof in his hand, and was engaged in scolding a sub-editor.

"Who is that?" he said, wheeling round. "I'm busy, can't see anyone."

"I beg your pardon," answered the Major with humility, "your people told me to come up. My name is Alan Vernon."

"Oh! I remember. Sit down for a moment, will you, and--Mr. Thomas, oblige me by taking away this rot and rewriting it entirely in the sense

I have outlined."

Mr. Thomas snatched his rejected copy and vanished through another door, whereon his chief remarked in an audible voice:

"That man is a perfect fool. Lucky I thought to look at his stuff. Well, he is no worse than the rest, in this weary world," and he burst into a hearty laugh and swung his chair round, adding, "Now then, Alan, what is it? I have a quarter of an hour at your service. Why, bless me! I was forgetting that it's more than a dozen years since we met; you were still a boy then, and now you have left the army with a D.S.O. and gratuity, and turned financier, which I think wouldn't have pleased your old father. Come, sit down here and let us talk."

"I didn't leave the army, Mr. Jackson," answered his visitor; "it left me; I was invalided out. They said I should never get my health back after that last go of fever, but I did."

"Ah! bad luck, very bad luck, just at the beginning of what should have been a big career, for I know they thought highly of you at the War Office, that is, if they can think. Well, you have grown into a fine-looking fellow, like your father, very, and someone else too," and he sighed, running his fingers through his grizzled hair. "But you don't remember her; she was before your time. Now let us get to business; there's no time for reminiscences in this office. What is it, Alan, for like other people I suppose that you want something?"

"It is about that Sahara flotation, Mr. Jackson," he began rather doubtfully.

The old editor's face darkened. "The Sahara flotation! That accursed----" and he ceased abruptly. "What have you, of all people in the world, got to do with it? Oh! I remember. Someone told me that you had gone into partnership with Aylward the company promoter, and that little beast, Champers-Haswell, who really is the clever one. Well, set it out, set it out."

"It seems, Mr. Jackson, that The Judge has refused not only our article, but also the advertisement of the company. I don't know much about this side of the affair myself, but Sir Robert asked me if I would come round and see if things couldn't be arranged."

"You mean that the man sent you to try and work on me because he knew that I used to be intimate with your family. Well, it is a poor errand and will have a poor end. You can't--no one on earth can, while I sit in this chair, not even my proprietors."

There was silence broken at last by Alan, who remarked awkwardly:

"If that is so, I must not take up your time any longer."

"I said that I would give you a quarter of an hour, and you have only

been here four minutes. Now, Alan Vernon, tell me as your father's old friend, why you have gone to herd with these gilded swine?"

There was something so earnest about the man's question that it did not even occur to his visitor to resent its roughness.

"Of course it is not original," he answered, "but I had this idea about flooding the Desert; I spent a furlough up there a few years ago and employed my time in making some rough surveys. Then I was obliged to leave the Service and went down to Yarleys after my father's death--it's mine now, you know, but worth nothing except a shooting rent, which just pays for the repairs. There I met Champers-Haswell, who lives near and is a kind of distant cousin of mine--my mother was a Champers--and happened to mention the thing to him. He took it up at once and introduced me to Aylward, and the end of it was, that they offered me a partnership with a small share in the business, because they said I was just the man they wanted."

"Just the man they wanted," repeated the editor after him. "Yes, the last of the Vernons, an engineer with an old name in his county, a clean record and plenty of ability. Yes, you would be just the man they wanted. And you accepted?"

"Yes. I was on my beam ends with nothing to do; I wanted to make some money. You see Yarleys has been in the family for over five hundred years, and it seemed hard to have to sell it. Also--also----" and he

paused.

"Ever meet Barbara Champers?" asked Mr. Jackson inconsequently. "I did once. Wonderfully nice girl, and very good-looking too. But of course you know her, and she is her uncle's ward, and their place isn't far off Yarleys, you say. Must be a connection of yours also."

Major Vernon started a little at the name and his face seemed to redden.

"Yes," he said, "I have met her and she is a connection."

"Will be a big heiress one day, I think," went on Mr. Jackson, "unless old Haswell makes off with her money. I think Aylward knows that; at any rate he was hanging about when I saw her."

Vernon started again, this time very perceptibly.

"Very natural--your going into the business, I mean, under all the circumstances," went on Mr. Jackson. "But now, if you will take my advice, you'll go out of it as soon as you can."

"Why?"

"Because, Alan Vernon, I am sure you don't want to see your name dragged in the dirt, any more than I do." He fumbled in a drawer and produced a typewritten document. "Take that," he said, "and study it at your

leisure. It's a sketch of the financial career of Messrs. Aylward and Champers-Haswell, also of the companies which they have promoted and been connected with, and what has happened to them and to those who invested in them. A man got it out for me yesterday and I'm going to use it. As regards this Sahara business, you think it all right, and so it may be from an engineering point of view, but you will never live to sail upon that sea which the British public is going to be asked to find so many millions to make. Look here. We have only three minutes more, so I will come to the point at once. It's Turkish territory, isn't it, and putting aside everything else, the security for the whole thing is a Firman from the Sultan?"

"Yes, Sir Robert Aylward and Haswell procured it in Constantinople. I have seen the document."

"Indeed, and are you well acquainted with the Sultan's signature? I know when they were there last autumn that potentate was very ill----"

"You mean----" said Major Vernon, looking up.

"I mean, Alan, that I like not the security. I won't say any more, as there is a law of libel in this land. But The Judge has certain sources of information. It may be that no protest will be made at once, for baksheesh can stop it for a while, but sooner or later the protest or repudiation will come, and perhaps some international bother; also much scandal. As to the scheme itself, it is shamelessly

over-capitalized for the benefit of the promoters--of whom, remember, Alan, you will appear as one. Now time's up. Perhaps you will take my advice, and perhaps you won't, but there it is for what it's worth as that of a man of the world and an old friend of your family. As for your puff article and your prospectus, I wouldn't put them in The Judge if you paid me a thousand pounds, which I daresay your friend, Aylward, would be quite ready to do. Good-bye. Come and see me again sometime, and tell me what has happened--and, I say"--this last was shouted through the closing door,--"give my kind regards to Miss Barbara, for wherever she happens to live, she is an honest woman."