

## CHAPTER III

### JEEKIE TELLS A TALE

The Court, Mr. Champers-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 was no electric light or other modern convenience at Yarleys, yet it was a place that everyone went to see because of its exceeding beauty and its historical associations. The moat by which it

was surrounded, the grass court within, for it was built on three sides of a square, the mullioned windows, the towered gateway of red brick, the low-panelled rooms hung with the portraits of departed Vernons, the sloping park and the splendid oaks that stood about, singly or in groups, were all of them perfect in their way. It was one of the most lovely of English homes, and oddly enough its neglected gardens and the air of decay that pervaded it, added to rather than decreased its charm.

But it is with The Court that we have to do at present, not with Yarleys. Mr. Champers-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 deeply interested in the forthcoming flotation. To describe them is unnecessary, for they have no part in our story, being only financiers of a certain class, remarkable for the riches they had acquired by means that for the most part would not bear examination. The riches were evident enough. Ever since the morning the owners of this wealth had arrived by ones or twos in their costly motorcars, attended by smart chauffeurs and valets. Their fur coats, their jewelled studs and rings, something in their very faces suggested money, which indeed was the bond that brought and held them together.

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, Jeekie, 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 as gone up to dress, Major, and so have the other gentlemen," said the head butler, Mr. Smith, "but Miss Champers 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 Jeekie 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 an 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 applecarts ere

now.' Is the Sahara Syndicate the applecart? 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 golf.

We can turn into 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, overheated room. He would have liked to keep it, but remembering Barbara's injunctions and the under-footman, threw it onto the fire and watched it burn. Jeekie 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 Jeekie. 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 extraordinary 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 Jeekie.

"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. Jeekie, 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 fire shall be extinguished and the sleeping-chamber ventilated. The other boot, if you please, Major."

"Jeekie," said Alan, "who is stopping in this place? Have you heard?"

"I collected some names on my way upstairs, Major. Three of the gentlemen you have never met before, but," he added suddenly breaking away from his high-flown book-learned English, as was his custom when in earnest, "Jeekie think they just black niggers like the rest, thief people. There ain't a white man in this house, except you and Miss Barbara and me, Major. Jeekie learnt all that in servant's hall palaver.

No, not now, other time. Everyone tell everything to Jeekie, poor old African fool, and he look up an answer, 'O law! you don't say so?' but keep his eyes and ears open all the same."

"I'll be bound you do, Jeekie," replied Alan, laughing again. "Well, go on keeping them open, and give me those trousers."

"Yes, Major," answered Jeekie, reassuming his grand manner, "I shall continue to collect information which may prove to your advantage, but personally I wish that you were clear of the whole caboodle, except Miss Barbara."

"Hear, hear," ejaculated Alan, "there goes the gong. Mind you come in and help to wait," and hurrying into his coat he departed downstairs.

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. Champers-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? Ah! you are thinking that one is not quite clear of business after all," and he glanced round at the company. "That's one of your cousin Haswell's faults; he can never shake himself free of the thing, never get any real recreation. I'd bet you a sovereign that he has a stenographer waiting by a telephone in the next room, just in case any opportunity should arise in the course of conversation. That is magnificent, but it is not wise. His heart can't stand it; it will wear him out before his time. Listen, they are all talking about the Sahara. I wish I were there; it must be quiet at any rate. The sands beneath, the eternal stars above. Yes, I wish I were there," he repeated with a sigh, and Alan noted that although his face could not be more pallid than its natural colour, it looked quite worn and old.

"So do I," he answered with enthusiasm.

Then a French gentleman on his 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 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 Champers.

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. For the rest she was sweetly dressed in a white robe with silver on it, and wore no ornaments save a row of small pearls about her throat and some lilies of the valley at her breast.

Barbara came straight onwards, looking neither to the right or to the left, till she reached her uncle, to whom she nodded. Then she walked to Alan and, offering him her hand, said:

"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."

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 Champers," 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. Apparently also it caused Aylward to feel angry, for he flashed a glance at Alan over her head of which the purport could not be mistaken, though his pale face remained as immovable as ever. "We are enemies. I hate you," said that glance. Probably Barbara saw it; at any rate before either of them could speak again, she said:

"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

patronized 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. Even Aylward, a temperate person, absorbed a good deal of champagne. As a consequence the conversation grew animated, and under cover of it, while Sir Robert was arguing with his neighbour on the left, Barbara asked in a low voice:

"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 criticizing it. "I mean, I have left the firm and have nothing more to do with the business."

Barbara's eyes lit up as she whispered back:

"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," and in his confusion he let his knife fall into the mutton, whence it rebounded, staining his shirt front.

Barbara laughed, that happy, delightful little laugh of hers, presumably at the accident with the knife. Whether or no she "minded" did not appear, only she handed her handkerchief, a costly, last-fringed trifle, to Alan to wipe the gravy off his shirt, which he took thinking it was

a napkin, and as she did so, touched his hand with a little caressing movement of her fingers. Whether this was done by chance or on purpose did not appear either. At least it made Alan feel extremely happy. Also when he discovered what it was, he kept that gravy-stained handkerchief, nor did she ever ask for it back again. Only once in after days when she happened to come across it stuffed away in the corner of a despatch-box, she blushed all over, and said that she had no idea that any man could be so foolish out of a book.

"Now that you are really clear of it, I am going for them," she said presently when the wiping process was finished. "I have only restrained myself for your sake," and leaning back in her chair she stared at the ceiling, lost in meditation.

Presently there came one of those silences which will fall upon dinner-parties at times, however excellent and plentiful the champagne.

"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 Champers," he answered, "am I not always at your service?" and all listened to hear upon what point their hostess desired to be enlightened.

"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?"

As he vouchsafed no answer to question, although Sir Robert muttered an uncomplimentary one between his lips which Barbara heard, or read, she continued:

"And you are all very rich and successful, are you not, and are going to be much richer and much more successful--next week. Now what I want to ask you is--how is it done?"

"Accepting the premises for the sake of argument, Miss Champers," replied Sir Robert, who felt that he could not refuse the challenge, "the answer is that it is done by finance."

"I am still in the dark," she said. "Finance, as I have heard of it, means floating companies, and companies are floated to earn money for those who invest in them. Now this afternoon as I was dull, I got hold of a book called the Directory of Directors, and looked up all your names in it, except those of the gentlemen from Paris, and the companies that you direct--I found out about those in another book. Well, I could not make out that any of these companies have ever earned any money, a dividend, don't you call it? Therefore how do you all grow so rich, and why do people invest in them?"

Now Sir Robert frowned, Alan coloured, two or three of the company laughed outright, and one of the French gentlemen who understood English and had already drunk as much as was good for him, remarked loudly to his neighbour, "Ah! she is charming. She do touch the spot, like that ointment you give me to-day. How do we grow rich and why do the people invest? Mon Dieu! why do they invest? That is the great mystery. I say that *cette belle demoiselle, votre nièce, est ravissante. Elle a d'esprit, mon ami Haswell.*"

Apparently her uncle did not share these sentiments, for he turned as red as any turkey-cock, and said across the great round table:

"My dear Barbara, I wish that you would leave matters which you do not understand alone. We are here to dine, not to talk about finance."

"Certainly, Uncle," she answered sweetly. "I stand, or rather sit, reproved. I suppose that I have put my foot into it as usual, and the worst of it is," she added, turning to Sir Robert, "that I am just as ignorant as I was before."

"If you want to master these matters, Miss Champers," said Aylward with a rather forced laugh, "you must go into training and worship at the shrine of"--he meant to say Mammon, then thinking that the word sounded unpleasant, substituted--"the Yellow God as we do."

At these words Alan, who had been studying his plate, looked up quickly,

and her uncle's face turned from red to white. But the irrepressible Barbara seized upon them.

"The Yellow God," she repeated. "Do you mean money or that fetish thing of Major Vernon's with the terrible woman's face that I saw at the office in the City. Well, to change the subject, tell us, Alan, what is that yellow god of yours and where did it come from?"

"My uncle Austin, who was my mother's brother and a missionary, brought it from West Africa a great many years ago. He was the first to visit the tribe who worship it; in fact I do not think that anyone has ever visited them since. But really I do not know all the story. Jeekie can tell you about it if you want to know, for he is one of that people and escaped with my uncle."

Now Jeekie having left the room, some of the guests wished to send for him, but Mr. Champers-Haswell objected. The end of it was that a compromise was effected, Alan undertaking to produce his retainer afterwards when they went to play billiards or cards.

Dinner was over at length and the diners, who had dined well, were gathered in the billiard room to smoke and amuse themselves as they wished. It was a very large room, sixty feet long indeed, with a wide space in the centre between the two tables, which was furnished as a

lounge. When the gentlemen entered it they found Barbara standing by the great fireplace in this central space, a little shape of white and silver in its emptiness.

"Forgive me for intruding on you," she said, "and please do not stop smoking, for I like the smell. I have sat up expressly to hear Jeekie's story of the Yellow God. Alan, produce Jeekie, or I shall go to bed at once."

Her uncle made a movement as though to interfere, but Sir Robert said something to him which appeared to cause him to change his mind, while the rest in some way or another signified an enthusiastic assent. All of them were anxious to see this Jeekie and hear his tale, if he had one to tell. So Jeekie was sent for and presently arrived clad in the dress clothes which are common to all classes in England and America. There he stood before them white-headed, ebony-faced, gigantic, imperturbable. There is no doubt that his appearance produced an effect, for it was unusual and indeed striking.

"You sent for me, Major?" he said, addressing his master, to whom he gave a military salute, for he had been Alan's servant when he was in the Army.

"Yes, Jeekie. Miss Barbara here and these gentlemen, wish you to tell them all that you know about the Yellow God."

The negro started and rolled his round eyes upwards till the whites of them showed, then began in his school-book English:

"That is a private subject, Major, upon which I should prefer not to discourse before this very public company."

A chorus of remonstrance arose and one of the Jewish gentlemen approaching Jeekie, slipped a couple of sovereigns into his great hand, which he promptly transferred to his pocket without seeming to notice them.

"Jeekie," said Barbara, "don't disappoint me."

"Very well, miss, I fall in with your wishes. The Yellow God that all these gentlemen worship, quite another god to that of which you desire that I should tell you. You know all about him. My god is of female sex."

At this statement his audience burst into laughter while Jeekie rolled his eyes again and waited till they had finished. "My god," he went on presently, "I mean, gentlemen, the god I used to pray to, for I am a good Christian now, has so much gold that she does not care for any more," and he paused.

"Then what does she care for?" asked someone.



"Blood," answered Jeekie. "She is god of Death. Her name is Little Bonsa or Small Swimming Head; she is wife of Big Bonsa or Great Swimming Head."

Again there was laughter, though less general--for instance, neither Sir Robert nor Mr. Champers-Haswell laughed. This merriment seemed to excite Jeekie. At any rate it caused him to cease his stilted talk and relapse into the strange vernacular that is common to all negroes, tintured with a racy slang that was all his own.

"You want to hear Yellow God palaver?" he said rapidly. "Very well, I tell you, you cocksure white men who think you know everything, but know nothing at all. My people, people of the Asiki, that mean people of Spirits, what you call ghosts and say you no believe in, but always look for behind door, they worship Yellow God, Bonsa Big and Bonsa Little, worship both and call them one; only Little Bonsa on trip to this country just now and sit and think in City office. Yellow God live long way up a great river, then turn to the left and walk six days through big forest where dwarf people shoot you with poisoned arrow. Then turn to the right, walk up stream where many wild beasts. Then turn to the left again and go in canoe through swamp where you die of fever, and across lake. Then walk over grassland and mountains. Then in kloof of the mountains where big black trees make a roof and river fall like thunder, find Asiki and gold house of the Yellow God. All that mountain gold, full of gold and beneath gold house Yellow God afloat in water. She what you call Queen, priestess, live there also, always there, very

beautiful woman called Asika with face like Yellow God, cruel, cruel. She take a husband every year, and every year he die because she always hunt for right man but never find him."

"Does she kill him then?" asked Barbara.

"Oh! no, she no kill him, Miss, he kill himself at end of year, glad to get away from Asika and go to spirits. While he live he have a very good time, plenty to eat, plenty wives, fine house, much gold as he like, only nothing to spend it on, pretty necklace, nice paint for face. But Asika, little bit by little bit she eat up his spirit. He see too many ghosts. The house where he sleep with dead men who once have his billet, full of ghosts and every night there come more and sit with him, sit all round him, look at him with great eyes, just like you look at me, till at last when Asika finish eating up his spirit, he go crazy, he howl like man in hell, he throw away all the gold they give him, and then, sometimes after one week, sometimes after one month, sometimes after one year if he be strong but never more, he run out at night and jump into canal where Yellow God float and god get him, while Asika sit on the bank and laugh, 'cause she hungry for new man to eat up his spirit too."

Jeekie's big voice died away to a whisper and ceased. There was a silence in the room, for even in the shine of the electric light and through the fumes of champagne, in more than one imagination there rose a vision of that haunted water in which floated the great Yellow God, and of some mad being casting himself to his death beneath the moon,

while his beautiful witch wife who was "hungry for more spirits" sat upon its edge and laughed. Although his language was now commonplace enough, even ludicrous at times, the negro had undoubtedly the art of narration. His auditors felt that he spoke of what he knew, or had seen, that the very recollection of it frightened him, therefore he frightened them.

Again Barbara broke the silence which she felt to be awkward.

"Why do more ghosts come very night to sit with the queen's husband, Jeekie?" she asked. "Where do they come from?"

"Out of the dead, miss, dead husbands of Asika from beginning of the world; what they call Munganas. Also always they make sacrifice to Yellow God. From far, far away them poor niggers send people to be sacrifice that their house or tribe get luck. Sometimes they send kings, sometimes great men, sometimes doctors, sometimes women what have twin babies. Also the Asiki bring people what is witches, or have drunk poison stuff which blacks call muavi and have not been sick, or perhaps son they love best to take curse off their roof. All these come to Yellow God. Then Asiki doctor, they have Death-palaver. On night of full moon they beat drum, and drum go Wow! Wow! Wow! and doctors pick out those to die that month. Once they pick out Jeekie, oh! good Lord, they pick out me," and as he said the words he gasped and with his great hand wiped off the sweat that started from his brow. "But Yellow God no take Jeekie that time, no want him and I escape."

"How?" asked Sir Robert.

"With my master, Major's uncle, Reverend Austin, he who come try to make Asiki Christian. He snap his fingers, put on small mask of Yellow God which he prig, Little Bonsa herself, that same face which sit in your office now," and he pointed to Sir Robert, "like one toad upon a stone. Priests think that god make herself into man, want holiday, take me out into forest to kill me and eat my life. So they let us go by and we go just as though devil kick us--fast, fast, and never see the Asiki any more. But Little Bonsa I bring with me for luck, tell truth I no dare leave her behind, she not stand that; and now she sit in your office and think and think and make magic there. That why you grow rich, because she know you worship her."

"That's a nice way for a baptized Christian to talk," said Barbara, adding, "But Jeekie, what do you mean when you say that the god did not take you?"

"I mean this, miss; when victim offered to Big Yellow God, priest-men bring him to edge of canal where the great god float. Then if Yellow God want him, it turn and swim across water."

"Swim across water! I thought you said it was only a mask of gold?"

"I don't know, miss, perhaps man inside the mask, perhaps spirit. I say

it swim across water in the night, always in the night, and lift itself up and look in victim's face. Then priest take him and kill him, sometimes one way--sometimes another. Or if he escape and they not kill him, all same for that Johnnie, he die in about one year, always die, no one ever live long if Yellow God swim to him in dark and rise up and smile in his face. No matter if it Big Bonsa or Little Bonsa, for they man and wife joined in holy matrimony and either do trick."

As these words left Jeekie's lips Alan became aware of some unusual movement on his left and looking round, saw that Mr. Champers-Haswell, who stood by him, had dropped the cigar which he held and, white as a sheet, was swaying to and fro. Indeed in another instant he would have fallen had not Alan caught him in his arms and supported him till others came to his assistance, when between them they carried him to a sofa. On their way they passed a table where spirits and soda water were set out, and to his astonishment Alan noticed that Sir Robert Aylward, looking little if at all better than his partner, had helped himself to half a tumbler of cognac, which he was swallowing in great gulps. Then there was confusion and someone went to telephone the doctor, while the deep voice of Jeekie was heard exclaiming:

"That Yellow God at work--oh yes, Little Bonsa on the job. Jeekie Christian man but no doubt she very powerful fetish and can do anything she like to them that worship her, and you see, she sit in office of these gentlemen. 'Spect she make Reverend Austin and me bring her to England because she got eye on firm of Messrs. Aylward & Haswell,

London, E.C. Oh, shouldn't wonder at all, for Bonga know everything."

"Oh, confound you and your fetish! Be off, you old donkey," almost shouted Alan.

"Major," replied the offended Jeekie, assuming his grand manner and language, "it was not I who wished to narrate this history of blood-stained superstitions of poor African. Mustn't blame old Jeekie if they make Christian gents sick as Channel steamer."

"Be off," repeated Alan, stamping his foot.

So Jeekie went, but outside the door, as it chanced, he encountered one of the Jew gentlemen who also appeared to be a little "sick." An idea striking him, he touched his white hair with his finger and said:

"You like Jeekie's pretty story, sir? Well, Jeekie think that if you make little present to him, like your brother in there, it please Yellow God very much, and bring you plenty luck."

Then acting upon some unaccustomed impulse, that Jew became exceedingly generous. In his pocket was a handful of sovereigns which he had been prepared to stake at bridge. He grasped them all and thrust them into Jeekie's outstretched palm, where they seemed to melt.

"Thank you, sir," said Jeekie. "Now I sure you have plenty luck, just

like your grandpa Jacob in Book when he do his brudder in eye."