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He Spent His Life in Bondage to a Color

The Yellow Pool

By FRANK OWEN

Author of "The Lantern-Maker," "The Wind That Tramps the World," etc.

OSCAR WILDE might have gotten his theme for the *Symphony in Yellow* from Paul Benoit if he had known him, although if he had, the poem could not have been called a symphony. For although Paul Benoit was as yellow as saffron, he presented a far from harmonious appearance. He was out of tune with the color scheme of life. He was about sixty years old but the marks of a peculiarly eventful though unhappy life were indelibly stamped upon him. His sickly-yellow face, straggly, filthy-yellow beard, yellow shirt (once white), and trousers yellow-green with age—all served but to accentuate his horrible expression.

His laugh was a leer showing toothless gums, yellow-red, a laugh not easily forgotten. When he was keenly pleased, it rose to a shrill pitch, weird and wild, but even odder than his laugh was the far-away look in his eyes. He lived in one world but heard and saw in another. He was like a man who dwelt in yesterday. He never talked of the present, or of the future, but only of the past. He liked to linger about the shadowy, forbidden corridors of unpleasant memories.

Many people are color-blind; they can not distinguish one shade from another; but Paul Benoit was color-mad; he was madly in love with

yellow. Except for this one peculiar twist to his mind, he was sane enough. Although now quite poor, he had once been extremely wealthy, one of the pioneer scientists who fought and conquered yellow fever in the Canal Zone.

He went color-mad in 1912 after he had been lost for several days in the deadly swamps near Panama. He had wandered out into the wilds one morning, as was his frequent custom, on some particular branch of research work. So interested did he become in his observations that he lost all track of time. He wandered through the maze of yellow bushes, not heeding the direction he took. It was intensely hot, so hot that the very air seemed molten yellow, and the yellow-chrome sky seemed to merge into the golden jungle-swamp. Toward midday the sun grew so glaring that it seemed as though all the fires of the heavens were concentrated solely upon him. He was almost blinded by the terrific yellow brilliance. He plunged forward like a drunken man. He knew not where he was going, but even had he known he could not have found his way in the burning glare.

Two days later he was found by a searching party that had been scouring the country for miles around. For three days he remained unconscious. Then one morning he awoke, weak but apparently perfectly rational. He remembered nothing of his experience and was very much interested in all his comrades had to say about it. To talk of the swamplands caused him no revulsion.

Within ten days he was up and around again. It was then that he was seized with color madness. He went wild over yellow. Every other color ceased to exist for him. His every emotion was mirrored in a yellow tone. His house inside and out he painted yellow. Furniture, bedding, carpets and rugs all changed in

rapid succession. Everything about his house was soon of a single tone of yellow. When one visited him in the heat of the day, it was like a visit to the sun. The light glistened and flashed back and forth, intensified by every object. The glazed finish to the walls made of them yellow mirrors. It was a veritable madhouse, but still there was something awe-inspiring about the weirdly burnished glow. And the silent swamps in back of the house, stretching for miles toward the west, served only to emphasize the oddness of the spot.

Not far from the house in the heart of the swamps was a stagnant yellow pool about a hundred feet wide and of unfathomed depth. The mixture of yellow muck and water shone in the sunlight like a pool of liquid gold. It was this pool that Paul Benoit used in much of his research work. He had built a stone ledge along one side of it so that one might approach in safety to the very brink.

IT WAS Dr. Colton who first suggested to Paul Benoit that he go off to California for a rest.

"A bit of quiet and peace in a white man's country will do you a world of good," he said.

Although he did not express his feelings, Dr. Colton believed that Paul Benoit was going mad from the sun. He believed that only in a sea-voyage was there any hope.

We had expected Paul Benoit to object to the suggestion, but to our surprize he seemed to welcome it.

"I do feel a bit fagged out," he admitted, "and I guess I'm about due for a fortnight's holiday."

Paul Benoit remained away for three weeks. Then he returned one morning when the sun glowed down unmercifully from a yellow-orange sky. But he did not return alone. He brought with him a golden girl who, he asserted, was a Manchu princess.

He took up his residence again in the yellow house with the mysterious golden girl. Never have I seen a woman who could even approach her in attraction. She drew me to her against my will, yet never did she seem even cognizant of my presence. If I had been the dust beneath her feet she could not have been more disdainful of me. In looks, she was a thing glorious to behold, tall and slim and molded like a Grecian goddess. Her almond-shaped eyes seemed to glow with the fires of golden passion; her lips were like splashes of blood on her yellow-olive skin. Her jet-black hair glistened like polished ebony. It seemed to reflect the golden glory of her face. When in her presence, it was as though one were enveloped in a golden-yellow cloud. Even after dusk, she seemed to cast off a radiance as though the sun were still shining on her.

And now I became conscious of another change in Paul Benoit. He had turned pagan. He worshiped that golden girl. He used to make her stand nude in the dazzling sunlight, by the yellow pool, her gorgeous golden body gleaming in the haze like the bronze body of a Hellenic statue. Golden girl, golden sun, golden pool—a symphony in yellow magic. Her body gleamed like burnished gold. She stood poised on the very brink of the vapid pool, not moving, as still as death. It was a sight more wonderful than Saadi, the poet, ever dreamed of. It was magnificent, but it was mad. Materialists are wrong when they say there is no meaning in color. There is witchery, an allure as seductive as hashish.

I don't know when it was that we began to realize that the golden girl was enameling her face in an effort to make it white and was putting just a touch of carmine in the center of her cheeks. It was that touch of red that shattered the harmony of Paul Benoit's life. No more terrible clash

with his beautiful yellow could be conceived. The incongruity of it was very impressive. She who was yellow wanted to be white, and he who was white worshiped yellow.

One day out by the pool, he seized her roughly by the wrist.

"Why are you trying to change your color?" he cried.

"Because I hate it," she said tensely. "To me there is nothing so vile as yellow. It is the color of putrid swamps, of disease, of unhealthy things."

"You lie," he snarled. "It is the color of the sun. Yellow dawn, yellow butterflies, yellow flowers, yellow gold. No other tone is so submerged in wealth."

She laughed mockingly at the intensity of his passion. As she did so, the golden thread of reason snapped within him. He seized her by the throat and held her over the yellow pool. His long bony fingers closed about her neck like steel talons. Without a murmur, she went limp in his arms. Her face began to turn blue. Oh, the horror of it! His golden girl was turning blue when he desired more than anything else for her to remain that wondrous yellow tint. His feelings revolted. Spasmodically he released his hold on her throat. As he did so there was a purling splash as the body of the golden girl disappeared forever in the yawning yellow pool.

Now many years have passed but Paul Benoit still lives in the yellow house by the yellow pool. He is old and poor. All his friends have fallen away from him. He is neglected, forgotten; but he does not care, for every night, at eventide, he goes to the yellow pool and sits for hours crooning wild, weird love songs to the golden girl whom he imagines he still sees poised nude on the brink of the water like a figure of burnished bronze.