

## **Chapter 2 - THE HEAVY CHEST**

Virginia and Sing were compelled to narrate the adventure of the afternoon a dozen times. The Chinaman was at a loss to understand what had deterred the pirates at the very threshold of victory. Von Horn thought that they had seen the reinforcements embarking from the shore, but Sing explained that that was impossible since the Ithaca had been directly between them and the point at which the returning crew had entered the boats.

Virginia was positive that her fusillade had frightened them into a hasty retreat, but again Sing discouraged any such idea when he pointed to the fact that another instant would have carried the prahu close to the Ithaca's side and out of the machine gun's radius of action.

The old Chinaman was positive that the pirates had some ulterior motive for simulating defeat, and his long years of experience upon pirate infested waters gave weight to his opinion. The weak spot in his argument was his inability to suggest a reasonable motive. And so it was that for a long time they were left to futile conjecture as to the action that had saved them from a bloody encounter with these bloodthirsty sea wolves.

For a week the men were busy constructing the new camp, but never again was Virginia left without a sufficient guard for her protection. Von Horn was always needed at the work, for to him had fallen the entire direction of matters of importance that were at all of a practical nature. Professor Maxon wished to watch the building of the houses and the stockade, that he might offer such suggestions as he thought necessary, and again the girl noticed her father's comparative indifference to her welfare.

She had been shocked at his apathy at the time of the pirate attack, and chagrined that it should have been necessary for von Horn to have insisted upon a proper guard being left with her thereafter.

The nearer the approach of the time when he might enter again upon those experiments which had now been neglected for the better part of a year the more self absorbed and moody became the professor. At times he was scarcely civil to those about him, and never now did he have a pleasant word or a caress for the daughter who had been his whole life but a few short months before.

It often seemed to Virginia when she caught her father's eyes upon her that there was a gleam of dislike in them, as though he would have been glad to have been rid of her that she might not in any way embarrass or interfere with his work.

The camp was at last completed, and on a Saturday afternoon all the heavier articles from the ship had been transported to it. On the following Monday the balance of the goods was to be sent on shore and the party were to transfer their residence to their new quarters.

Late Sunday afternoon a small native boat was seen rounding the point at the harbor's southern extremity, and after a few minutes it drew alongside the Ithaca. There were but three men in it--two Dyaks and a Malay. The latter was a tall, well built man of middle age, of a sullen and degraded countenance. His garmenture was that of the ordinary Malay boatman, but there was that in his mien and his attitude toward his companions which belied his lowly habiliments.

In answer to von Horn's hail the man asked if he might come aboard and trade; but once on the deck it developed that he had brought nothing wherewith to trade. He seemed not the slightest disconcerted by this discovery, stating that he would bring such articles as they wished when he had learned what their requirements were.

The ubiquitous Sing was on hand during the interview, but from his expressionless face none might guess what was passing through the tortuous channels of his Oriental mind. The Malay had been aboard nearly half an hour talking with von Horn when the mate, Bududreen, came on deck, and it was Sing alone who noted the quickly concealed flash of recognition which passed between the two Malays.

The Chinaman also saw the gleam that shot into the visitor's eye as Virginia emerged from the cabin, but by no word or voluntary outward sign did the man indicate that he had even noticed her. Shortly afterward he left, promising to return with provisions the following day. But it was to be months before they again saw him.

That evening as Sing was serving Virginia's supper he asked her if she had recognized their visitor of the afternoon.

"Why no, Sing," she replied, "I never saw him before."

"Sh!" admonished the celestial. "No talkee so strong, wallee have ear all same labbit."

"What do you mean, Sing?" asked the girl in a low voice. "How perfectly weird and mysterious you are. Why you make the cold chills run up my spine," she ended, laughing. But Sing did not return her smile as was his custom.

"You no lemembra tallee Lajah stand up wavee lite clothee in plilate boat, ah?" he urged.

"Oh, Sing," she cried, "I do indeed! But unless you had reminded me I should never have thought to connect him with our visitor of today--they do look very much alike, don't they?"

"Lookeelike! Ugh, they all samee one man. Sing know. You lookee out, Linee," which was the closest that Sing had ever been able to come to pronouncing Virginia.

"Why should I look out? He doesn't want me," said the girl, laughingly.

"Don't you bee too damee sure 'bout lat, Linee," was Sing's inelegant but convincing reply, as he turned toward his galley.

The following morning the party, with the exception of three Malays who were left to guard the Ithaca, set out for the new camp. The journey was up the bed of the small stream which emptied into the harbor, so that although fifteen men had passed back and forth through the jungle from the beach to the camp every day for two weeks, there was no sign that human foot had ever crossed the narrow strip of sand that lay between the dense foliage and the harbor.

The gravel bottom of the rivulet made fairly good walking, and as Virginia was borne in a litter between two powerful lascars it was not even necessary that she wet her feet in the ascent of the stream to the camp. The distance was short, the center of the camp being but a mile from the harbor, and less than half a mile from the opposite shore of the island which was but two miles at its greatest breadth, and two and a quarter at its greatest length.

At the camp Virginia found that a neat clearing had been made upon a little tableland, a palisade built about it, and divided into three parts; the most northerly of which contained a small house for herself and her father, another for von Horn, and a common cooking and eating house over which Sing was to preside.

The enclosure at the far end of the palisade was for the Malay and lascar crew and there also were quarters for Bududreen and the Malay second mate. The center enclosure contained Professor Maxon's workshop. This compartment of the enclosure Virginia was not invited to inspect, but as members of the crew

carried in the two great chests which the professor had left upon the Ithaca until the last moment, Virginia caught a glimpse of the two buildings that had been erected within this central space--a small, square house which was quite evidently her father's laboratory, and a long, low thatched shed divided into several compartments, each containing a rude bunk. She wondered for whom they could be intended. Quarters for all the party had already been arranged for elsewhere, nor, thought she, would her father wish to house any in such close proximity to his workshop, where he would desire absolute quiet and freedom from interruption. The discovery perplexed her not a little, but so changed were her relations with her father that she would not question him upon this or any other subject.

As the two chests were being carried into the central campong, Sing, who was standing near Virginia, called her attention to the fact that Bududreen was one of those who staggered beneath the weight of the heavier burden.

"Bludleen, him mate. Why workee alsame lascar boy? Eh?" But Virginia could give no reason.

"I am afraid you don't like Bududreen, Sing," she said. "Has he ever harmed you in any way?"

"Him? No, him no hurt Sing. Sing poor," with which more or less enigmatical rejoinder the Chinaman returned to his work. But he muttered much to himself the balance of the day, for Sing knew that a chest that strained four men in the carrying could contain but one thing, and he knew that Bududreen was as wise in such matters as he.

For a couple of months the life of the little hidden camp went on peacefully and without exciting incident. The Malay and lascar crew divided their time between watch duty on board the Ithaca, policing the camp, and cultivating a little patch of clearing just south of their own campong.

There was a small bay on the island's east coast, only a quarter of a mile from camp, in which oysters were found, and one of the Ithaca's boats was brought around to this side of the island for fishing. Bududreen often accompanied these expeditions, and on several occasions the lynx-eyed Sing had seen him returning to camp long after the others had retired for the night.

Professor Maxon scarcely ever left the central enclosure. For days and nights at a time Virginia never saw him, his meals being passed in to him by Sing through a small trap door that had been cut in the partition wall of the "court of mystery" as von Horn had christened the section of the camp devoted to the professor's experimentations.

Von Horn himself was often with his employer, as he enjoyed the latter's complete confidence, and owing to his early medical training was well fitted to act as a competent assistant; but he was often barred from the workshop, and at such times was much with Virginia.

The two took long walks through the untouched jungle, exploring their little island, and never failing to find some new and wonderful proof of Nature's creative power among its flora and fauna.

"What a marvellous thing is creation," exclaimed Virginia as she and von Horn paused one day to admire a tropical bird of unusually brilliant plumage. "How insignificant is man's greatest achievement beside the least of Nature's works."

"And yet," replied von Horn, "man shall find Nature's secret some day. What a glorious accomplishment for him who first succeeds. Can you imagine a more glorious consummation of a man's life work--your father's, for example?"

The girl looked at von Horn closely.

"Dr. von Horn," she said, "pride has restrained me from asking what was evidently intended that I should not know. For years my father has been interested in an endeavor to solve the mystery of life--that he would ever attempt to utilize the secret should he have been so fortunate as to discover it had never occurred to me. I mean that he should try to usurp the functions of the Creator I could never have believed, but my knowledge of him, coupled with what you have said, and the extreme lengths to which he has gone to maintain absolute secrecy for his present experiments can only lead to one inference; and that, that his present work, if successful, would have results that would not be countenanced by civilized society or government. Am I right?"

Von Horn had attempted to sound the girl that he might, if possible, discover her attitude toward the work in which her father and he were engaged. He had succeeded beyond his hopes, for he had not intended that she should guess so much of the truth as she had. Should her interest in the work have proved favorable it had been his intention to acquaint her fully with the marvellous success which already had attended their experiments, and to explain their hopes and plans for the future, for he had seen how her father's attitude had hurt her and hoped to profit himself by reposing in her the trust and confidence that her father denied her.

And so it was that her direct question left him floundering in a sea of embarrassment, for to tell her the truth now would gain him no favor in her eyes, while it certainly would lay him open to the suspicion and distrust of her father should he learn of it.

"I cannot answer your question, Miss Maxon," he said, finally, "for your father's strictest injunction has been that I divulge to no one the slightest happening within the court of mystery. Remember that I am in your father's employ, and that no matter what my personal convictions may be regarding the work he has been doing I may only act with loyalty to his lightest command while I remain upon his payroll. That you are here," he added, "is my excuse for continuing my connection with certain things of which my conscience does not approve."

The girl glanced at him quickly. She did not fully understand the motive for his final avowal, and a sudden intuition kept her from questioning him. She had learned to look upon von Horn as a very pleasant companion and a good friend--she was not quite certain that she would care for any change in their relations, but his remark had sowed the seed of a new thought in her mind as he had intended that it should.

When von Horn returned to the court of mystery, he narrated to Professor Maxon the gist of his conversation with Virginia, wishing to forestall anything which the girl might say to her father that would give him an impression that von Horn had been talking more than he should. Professor Maxon listened to the narration in silence. When von Horn had finished, he cautioned him against divulging to Virginia anything that took place within the inner campong.

"She is only a child," he said, "and would not understand the importance of the work we are doing. All that she would be able to see is the immediate moral effect of these experiments upon the subjects themselves--she would not look into the future and appreciate the immense advantage to mankind that must accrue from a successful termination of our research. The future of the world will be assured when once we have demonstrated the possibility of the chemical production of a perfect race."

"Number One, for example," suggested von Horn.

Professor Maxon glanced at him sharply.

"Levity, Doctor, is entirely out of place in the contemplation of the magnificent work I have already accomplished," said the professor tartly. "I admit that Number One leaves much to be desired--much to be desired; but Number Two shows a marked advance along certain lines, and I am sure that tomorrow will divulge in experiment Number Three such strides as will forever silence any propensity toward scoffing which you may now entertain."

"Forgive me, Professor," von Horn hastened to urge. "I did not intend to deride the wonderful discoveries which you have made, but it is only natural that we

should both realize that Number One is not beautiful. To one another we may say what we would not think of suggesting to outsiders."

Professor Maxon was mollified by this apology, and turned to resume his watch beside a large, coffin-shaped vat. For a while von Horn was silent. There was that upon his mind which he had wished to discuss with his employer since months ago, but the moment had never arrived which seemed at all propitious, nor did it appear likely ever to arrive. So the doctor decided to broach the subject now, as being psychologically as favorable a time as any.

"Your daughter is far from happy, Professor," he said, "nor do I feel that, surrounded as we are by semi-savage men, she is entirely safe."

Professor Maxon looked up from his vigil by the vat, eyeing von Horn closely.

"Well?" he asked.

"It seemed to me that had I a closer relationship I might better assist in adding to her happiness and safety--in short, Professor, I should like your permission to ask Virginia to marry me."

There had been no indication in von Horn's attitude toward the girl that he loved her. That she was beautiful and intelligent could not be denied, and so it was small wonder that she might appeal strongly to any man, but von Horn was quite evidently not of the marrying type. For years he had roved the world in search of adventure and excitement. Just why he had left America and his high place in the navy he never had divulged; nor why it was that for seven years he had not set his foot upon ground which lay beneath the authority of Uncle Sam.

Sing Lee who stood just without the trap door through which he was about to pass Professor Maxon's evening meal to him could not be blamed for overhearing the conversation, though it may have been culpable in him in making no effort to divulge his presence, and possibly equally unpraiseworthy, as well as lacking in romance, to attribute the doctor's avowal to his knowledge of the heavy chest.

As Professor Maxon eyed the man before replying to his abrupt request, von Horn noted a strange and sudden light in the older man's eyes--a something which he never before had seen there and which caused an uncomfortable sensation to creep over him--a manner of bristling that was akin either to fear or horror, von Horn could not tell which.

Then the professor arose from his seat and came very close to the younger man, until his face was only a few inches from von Horn's.

"Doctor," he whispered in a strange, tense voice, "you are mad. You do not know what you ask. Virginia is not for such as you. Tell me that she does not know of your feelings toward her. Tell me that she does not reciprocate your love. Tell me the truth, man." Professor Maxon seized von Horn roughly by both shoulders, his glittering eyes glaring terribly into the other's.

"I have never spoken to her of love, Professor," replied von Horn quietly, "nor do I know what her sentiments toward me may be. Nor do I understand, sir, what objections you may have to me--I am of a very old and noble family." His tone was haughty but respectful.

Professor Maxon released his hold upon his assistant, breathing a sigh of relief.

"I am glad," he said, "that it has gone no further, for it must not be. I have other, nobler aspirations for my daughter. She must wed a perfect man--none such now exists. It remains for me to bring forth the ideal mate for her--nor is the time far distant. A few more weeks and we shall see such a being as I have long dreamed." Again the queer light flickered for a moment in the once kindly and jovial eyes of the scientist.

Von Horn was horrified. He was a man of little sentiment. He could in cold blood have married this girl for the wealth he knew that she would inherit; but the thought that she was to be united with such a THING--"Lord! It is horrible," and his mind pictured the fearful atrocity which was known as Number One.

Without a word he turned and left the campong. A moment later Sing's knock aroused Professor Maxon from the reverie into which he had fallen, and he stepped to the trap door to receive his evening meal.