

Chapter 3 - BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

One day, about two weeks later, von Horn and the professor were occupied closely with their work in the court of mystery. Developments were coming in riotous confusion. A recent startling discovery bade fare to simplify and expedite the work far beyond the fondest dreams of the scientist.

Von Horn's interest in the marvellous results that had been obtained was little short of the professor's--but he foresaw a very different outcome of it all, and by day never moved without a gun at either hip, and by night both of them were beside him.

Sing Lee, the noonday meal having been disposed of, set forth with rod, string and bait to snare gulls upon the beach. He moved quietly through the jungle, his sharp eyes and ears always alert for anything that might savor of the unusual, and so it was that he saw the two men upon the beach, while they did not see him at all.

They were Bududreen and the same tall Malay whom Sing had seen twice before--once in splendid raiment and commanding the pirate prahu, and again as a simple boatman come to the Ithaca to trade, but without the goods to carry out his professed intentions.

The two squatted on the beach at the edge of the jungle a short distance above the point at which Sing had been about to emerge when he discovered them, so that it was but the work of a moment or two for the Chinaman to creep stealthily through the dense underbrush to a point directly above them and not three yards from where they conversed in low tones--yet sufficiently loud that Sing missed not a word.

"I tell you, Bududreen, that it will be quite safe," the tall Malay was saying. "You yourself tell me that none knows of the whereabouts of these white men, and if they do not return your word will be accepted as to their fate. Your reward will be great if you bring the girl to me, and if you doubt the loyalty of any of your own people a kris will silence them as effectually as it will silence the white men."

"It is not fear of the white men, oh, Rajah Muda Saffir, that deters me," said Bududreen, "but how shall I know that after I have come to your country with the girl I shall not myself be set upon and silenced with a golden kris--there be many that will be jealous of the great service I have done for the mighty rajah."

Muda Saffir knew perfectly well that Bududreen had but diplomatically expressed a fear as to his own royal trustworthiness, but it did not anger him, since the

charge was not a direct one; but what he did not know was of the heavy chest and Bududreen's desire to win the price of the girl and yet be able to save for himself a chance at the far greater fortune which he knew lay beneath that heavy oaken lid.

Both men had arisen now and were walking across the beach toward a small, native canoe in which Muda Saffir had come to the meeting place. They were out of earshot before either spoke again, so that what further passed between them Sing could not even guess, but he had heard enough to confirm the suspicions he had entertained for a long while.

He did not fish for gulls that day. Bududreen and Muda Saffir stood talking upon the beach, and the Chinaman did not dare venture forth for fear they might suspect that he had overheard them. If old Sing Lee knew his Malays, he was also wise enough to give them credit for knowing their Chinamen, so he waited quietly in hiding until Muda Saffir had left, and Bududreen returned to camp.

Professor Maxon and von Horn were standing over one of the six vats that were arranged in two rows down the center of the laboratory. The professor had been more communicative and agreeable today than for some time past, and their conversation had assumed more of the familiarity that had marked it during the first month of their acquaintance at Singapore.

"And what of these first who are so imperfect?" asked von Horn. "You cannot take them into civilization, nor would it be right to leave them here upon this island. What will you do with them?"

Professor Maxon pondered the question for a moment.

"I have given the matter but little thought," he said at length. "They are but the accidents of my great work. It is unfortunate that they are as they are, but without them I could have never reached the perfection that I am sure we are to find here," and he tapped lovingly upon the heavy glass cover of the vat before which he stood. "And this is but the beginning. There can be no more mistakes now, though I doubt if we can ever improve upon that which is so rapidly developing here." Again he passed his long, slender hand caressingly over the coffin-like vat at the head of which was a placard bearing the words, NUMBER THIRTEEN.

"But the others, Professor!" insisted von Horn. "We must decide. Already they have become a problem of no small dimensions. Yesterday Number Five desired some plantains that I had given to Number Seven. I tried to reason with him, but, as you know, he is mentally defective, and for answer he rushed at Number Seven to tear the coveted morsel from him. The result was a battle royal that

might have put to shame two Bengal tigers. Twelve is tractable and intelligent. With his assistance and my bull whip I succeeded in separating them before either was killed. Your greatest error was in striving at first for such physical perfection. You have overdone it, with the result that the court of mystery is peopled by a dozen brutes of awful muscularity, and scarcely enough brain among the dozen to equip three properly."

"They are as they are," replied the professor. "I shall do for them what I can--when I am gone they must look to themselves. I can see no way out of it."

"What you have given you may take away," said von Horn, in a low tone.

Professor Maxon shuddered. Those three horrid days in the workshop at Ithaca flooded his memory with all the gruesome details he had tried for so many months to forget. The haunting ghosts of the mental anguish that had left him an altered man--so altered that there were times when he had feared for his sanity!

"No, no!" he almost shouted. "It would be murder. They are--"

"They are THINGS," interrupted von Horn. "They are not human--they are not even beast. They are terrible, soulless creatures. You have no right to permit them to live longer than to substantiate your theory. None but us knows of their existence--no other need know of their passing. It must be done. They are a constant and growing menace to us all, but most of all to your daughter."

A cunning look came into the professor's eyes.

"I understand," he said. "The precedent once established, all must perish by its edict--even those which may not be grotesque or bestial--even this perfect one," and he touched again the vat, "and thus you would rid yourself of rival suitors. But no!" he went on in a high, trembling voice. "I shall not be led to thus compromise myself, and be thwarted in my cherished plan. Be this one what he may he shall wed my daughter!"

The man had raised himself upon his toes as he reached his climax--his clenched hand was high above his head--his voice fairly thundered out the final sentence, and with the last word he brought his fist down upon the vat before him. In his eyes blazed the light of unchained madness.

Von Horn was a brave man, but he shuddered at the maniacal ferocity of the older man, and shrank back. The futility of argument was apparent, and he turned and left the workshop.

Sing Lee was late that night. In fact he did not return from his fruitless quest for gulls until well after dark, nor would he vouchsafe any explanation of the consequent lateness of supper. Nor could he be found shortly after the evening meal when Virginia sought him.

Not until the camp was wrapped in the quiet of slumber did Sing Lee return--stealthy and mysterious--to creep under cover of a moonless night to the door of the workshop. How he gained entrance only Sing Lee knows, but a moment later there was a muffled crash of broken glass within the laboratory, and the Chinaman had slipped out, relocked the door, and scurried to his nearby shack. But there was no occasion for his haste--no other ear than his had heard the sound within the workshop.

It was almost nine the following morning before Professor Maxon and von Horn entered the laboratory. Scarcely had the older man passed the doorway than he drew up his hands in horrified consternation. Vat Number Thirteen lay dashed to the floor--the glass cover was broken to a million pieces--a sticky, brownish substance covered the matting. Professor Maxon hid his face in his hands.

"God!" he cried. "It is all ruined. Three more days would have--"

"Look!" cried von Horn. "It is not too soon."

Professor Maxon mustered courage to raise his eyes from his hands, and there he beheld, seated in a far corner of the room a handsome giant, physically perfect. The creature looked about him in a dazed, uncomprehending manner. A great question was writ large upon his intelligent countenance. Professor Maxon stepped forward and took him by the hand.

"Come," he said, and led him toward a smaller room off the main workshop. The giant followed docilely, his eyes roving about the room--the pitiful questioning still upon his handsome features. Von Horn turned toward the campong.

Virginia, deserted by all, even the faithful Sing, who, cheated of his sport on the preceding day, had again gone to the beach to snare gulls, became restless of the enforced idleness and solitude. For a time she wandered about the little compound which had been reserved for the whites, but tiring of this she decided to extend her stroll beyond the palisade, a thing which she had never before done unless accompanied by von Horn--a thing both he and her father had cautioned her against.

"What danger can there be?" she thought. "We know that the island is uninhabited by others than ourselves, and that there are no dangerous beasts. And, anyway, there is no one now who seems to care what becomes of me,

unless--unless--I wonder if he does care. I wonder if I care whether or not he cares. Oh, dear, I wish I knew," and as she soliloquized she wandered past the little clearing and into the jungle that lay behind the campong.

As von Horn and Professor Maxon talked together in the laboratory before the upsetting of vat Number Thirteen, a grotesque and horrible creature had slunk from the low shed at the opposite side of the campong until it had crouched at the flimsy door of the building in which the two men conversed. For a while it listened intently, but when von Horn urged the necessity for dispatching certain "terrible, soulless creatures" an expression of intermingled fear and hatred convulsed the hideous features, and like a great grizzly it turned and lumbered awkwardly across the campong toward the easterly, or back wall of the enclosure.

Here it leaped futilely a half dozen times for the top of the palisade, and then trembling and chattering in rage it ran back and forth along the base of the obstacle, just as a wild beast in captivity paces angrily before the bars of its cage.

Finally it paused to look once more at the senseless wood that barred its escape, as though measuring the distance to the top. Then the eyes roamed about the campong to rest at last upon the slanting roof of the thatched shed which was its shelter. Presently a slow idea was born in the poor, malformed brain.

The creature approached the shed. He could just reach the saplings that formed the frame work of the roof. Like a huge sloth he drew himself to the roof of the structure. From here he could see beyond the palisade, and the wild freedom of the jungle called to him. He did not know what it was but in its leafy wall he perceived many breaks and openings that offered concealment from the creatures who were plotting to take his life.

Yet the wall was not fully six feet from him, and the top of it at least five feet above the top of the shed--those who had designed the campong had been careful to set this structure sufficiently far from the palisade to prevent its forming too easy an avenue of escape.

The creature glanced fearfully toward the workshop. He remembered the cruel bull whip that always followed each new experiment on his part that did not coincide with the desires of his master, and as he thought of von Horn a nasty gleam shot his mismated eyes.

He tried to reach across the distance between the roof and the palisade, and in the attempt lost his balance and nearly precipitated himself to the ground below. Cautiously he drew back, still looking about for some means to cross the chasm. One of the saplings of the roof, protruding beyond the palm leaf thatch, caught his attention. With a single wrench he tore it from its fastenings. Extending it

toward the palisade he discovered that it just spanned the gap, but he dared not attempt to cross upon its single slender strand.

Quickly he ripped off a half dozen other poles from the roof, and laying them side by side, formed a safe and easy path to freedom. A moment more and he sat astride the top of the wall. Drawing the poles after him, he dropped them one by one to the ground outside the campong. Then he lowered himself to liberty.

Gathering the saplings under one huge arm he ran, lumberingly, into the jungle. He would not leave evidence of the havoc he had wrought; the fear of the bull whip was still strong upon him. The green foliage closed about him and the peaceful jungle gave no sign of the horrid brute that roamed its shadowed mazes.

As von Horn stepped into the campong his quick eye perceived the havoc that had been wrought with the roof at the east end of the shed. Quickly he crossed to the low structure. Within its compartments a number of deformed monsters squatted upon their haunches, or lay prone upon the native mats that covered the floor.

As the man entered they looked furtively at the bull whip which trailed from his right hand, and then glanced fearfully at one another as though questioning which was the malefactor on this occasion.

Von Horn ran his eyes over the hideous assemblage.

"Where is Number One?" he asked, directing his question toward a thing whose forehead gave greater promise of intelligence than any of his companions.

The one addressed shook his head.

Von Horn turned and made a circuit of the campong. There was no sign of the missing one and no indication of any other irregularity than the demolished portion of the roof. With an expression of mild concern upon his face he entered the workshop.

"Number One has escaped into the jungle, Professor," he said.

Professor Maxon looked up in surprise, but before he had an opportunity to reply a woman's scream, shrill with horror, smote upon their startled ears.

Von Horn was the first to reach the campong of the whites. Professor Maxon was close behind him, and the faces of both were white with apprehension. The enclosure was deserted. Not even Sing was there. Without a word the two men sprang through the gateway and raced for the jungle in the direction from which that single, haunting cry had come.

Virginia Maxon, idling beneath the leafy shade of the tropical foliage, became presently aware that she had wandered farther from the campong than she had intended. The day was sultry, and the heat, even in the dense shade of the jungle, oppressive. Slowly she retraced her steps, her eyes upon the ground, her mind absorbed in sad consideration of her father's increasing moodiness and eccentricity.

Possibly it was this very abstraction which deadened her senses to the near approach of another. At any rate the girl's first intimation that she was not alone came when she raised her eyes to look full into the horrid countenance of a fearsome monster which blocked her path toward camp.

The sudden shock brought a single involuntary scream from her lips. And who can wonder! The thing thrust so unexpectedly before her eyes was hideous in the extreme. A great mountain of deformed flesh clothed in dirty, white cotton pajamas! Its face was of the ashen hue of a fresh corpse, while the white hair and pink eyes denoted the absence of pigment; a characteristic of albinos.

One eye was fully twice the diameter of the other, and an inch above the horizontal plane of its tiny mate. The nose was but a gaping orifice above a deformed and twisted mouth. The thing was chinless, and its small, foreheadless head surrounded its colossal body like a cannon ball on a hill top. One arm was at least twelve inches longer than its mate, which was itself long in proportion to the torso, while the legs, similarly mismated and terminating in huge, flat feet that protruded laterally, caused the thing to lurch fearfully from side to side as it lumbered toward the girl.

A sudden grimace lighted the frightful face as the grotesque eyes fell upon this new creature. Number One had never before seen a woman, but the sight of this one awoke in the unplumbed depths of his soulless breast a great desire to lay his hands upon her. She was very beautiful. Number One wished to have her for his very own; nor would it be a difficult matter, so fragile was she, to gather her up in those great, brute arms and carry her deep into the jungle far out of hearing of the bull-whip man and the cold, frowning one who was continually measuring and weighing Number One and his companions, the while he scrutinized them with those strange, glittering eyes that frightened one even more than the cruel lash of the bull whip.

Number One lurched forward, his arms outstretched toward the horror stricken girl. Virginia tried to cry out again--she tried to turn and run; but the horror of her impending fate and the terror that those awful features induced left her paralyzed and helpless.

The thing was almost upon her now. The mouth was wide in a hideous attempt to smile. The great hands would grasp her in another second--and then there was a sudden crashing of the underbrush behind her, a yellow, wrinkled face and a flying pig-tail shot past her, and the brave old Sing Lee grappled with the mighty monster that threatened her.

The battle was short--short and terrible. The valiant Chinaman sought the ashen throat of his antagonist, but his wiry, sinewy muscles were as reeds beneath the force of that inhuman power that opposed them. Holding the girl at arm's length in one hand, Number One tore the battling Chinaman from him with the other, and lifting him bodily above his head, hurled him stunned and bleeding against the bole of a giant buttress tree. Then lifting Virginia in his arms once more he dived into the impenetrable mazes of the jungle that lined the more open pathway between the beach and camp.