

Chapter 4 - A NEW FACE

As Professor Maxon and von Horn rushed from the workshop to their own campong, they neglected, in their haste, to lock the door between, and for the first time since the camp was completed it stood unlatched and ajar.

The professor had been engaged in taking careful measurements of the head of his latest experiment, the while he coached the young man in the first rudiments of spoken language, and now the subject of his labors found himself suddenly deserted and alone. He had not yet been without the four walls of the workshop, as the professor had wished to keep him from association with the grotesque results of his earlier experiments, and now a natural curiosity tempted him to approach the door through which his creator and the man with the bull whip had so suddenly disappeared.

He saw before him a great walled enclosure roofed by a lofty azure dome, and beyond the walls the tops of green trees swaying gently in the soft breezes. His nostrils tasted the incense of fresh earth and growing things. For the first time he felt the breath of Nature, free and unconfined, upon his brow.

He drew his giant frame to its full height and drank in the freedom and the sweetness of it all, filling his great lungs to their fullest; and with the first taste he learned to hate the close and stuffy confines of his prison.

His virgin mind was filled with wonder at the wealth of new impressions which surged to his brain through every sense. He longed for more, and the open gateway of the campong was a scarce needed invitation to pass to the wide world beyond. With the free and easy tread of utter unconsciousness of self, he passed across the enclosure and stepped out into the clearing which lay between the palisade and the jungle.

Ah, here was a still more beautiful world! The green leaves nodded to him, and at their invitation he came and the jungle reached out its million arms to embrace him. Now before him, behind, on either side there was naught but glorious green beauty shot with splashes of gorgeous color that made him gasp in wonderment.

Brilliant birds rose from amidst it all, skimming hither and thither above his head--he thought that the flowers and the birds were the same, and when he reached out and plucked a blossom, tenderly, he wondered that it did not flutter in his hand. On and on he walked, but slowly, for he must not miss a single sight in the strange and wonderful place; and then, of a sudden, the quiet beauty

of the scene was harshly broken by the crashing of a monster through the underbrush.

Number Thirteen was standing in a little open place in the jungle when the discordant note first fell upon his ears, and as he turned his head in the direction of the sound he was startled at the hideous aspect of the thing which broke through the foliage before him.

What a horrid creature! But on the same instant his eyes fell upon another borne in the arms of the terrible one. This one was different--very different,--soft and beautiful and white. He wondered what it all meant, for everything was strange and new to him; but when he saw the eyes of the lovely one upon him, and her arms outstretched toward him, though he did not understand the words upon her lips, he knew that she was in distress. Something told him that it was the ugly thing that carried her that was the author of her suffering.

Virginia Maxon had been half unconscious from fright when she suddenly saw a white man, clothed in coarse, white, native pajamas, confronting her and the misshapen beast that was bearing her away to what frightful fate she could but conjecture.

At the sight of the man her voice returned with returning hope, and she reached her arms toward him, calling upon him to save her. Although he did not respond she thought that he understood for he sprang toward them before her appeal was scarce uttered.

As before, when Sing had threatened to filch his new possession from him, Number One held the girl with one hand while he met the attack of this new assailant with the other; but here was very different metal than had succumbed to him before.

It is true that Number Thirteen knew nothing whatever of personal combat, but Number One had but little advantage of him in the matter of experience, while the former was equipped with great natural intelligence as well as steel muscles no whit less powerful than his deformed predecessor.

So it was that the awful giant found his single hand helpless to cope with the strength of his foeman, and in a brief instant felt powerful fingers clutching at his throat. Still reluctant to surrender his hold upon his prize, he beat futilely at the face of his enemy, but at last the agony of choking compelled him to drop the girl and grapple madly with the man who choked him with one hand and rained mighty and merciless blows upon his face and head with the other.

His captive sank to the ground, too weak from the effects of nervous shock to escape, and with horror-filled eyes watched the two who battled over her. She saw that her would-be rescuer was young and strong featured--all together a very fine specimen of manhood; and to her great wonderment it was soon apparent that he was no unequal match for the great mountain of muscle that he fought.

Both tore and struck and clawed and bit in the frenzy of mad, untutored strife, rolling about on the soft carpet of the jungle almost noiselessly except for their heavy breathing and an occasional beast-like snarl from Number One. For several minutes they fought thus until the younger man succeeded in getting both hands upon the throat of his adversary, and then, choking relentlessly, he raised the brute with him from the ground and rushed him fiercely backward against the stem of a tree. Again and again he hurled the monstrous thing upon the unyielding wood, until at last it hung helpless and inert in his clutches, then he cast it from him, and without another glance at it turned toward the girl.

Here was a problem indeed. Now that he had won her, what was he to do with her? He was but an adult child, with the brain and brawn of a man, and the ignorance and inexperience of the new-born. And so he acted as a child acts, in imitation of what it has seen others do. The brute had been carrying the lovely creature, therefore that must be the thing for him to do, and so he stooped and gathered Virginia Maxon in his great arms.

She tried to tell him that she could walk after a moment's rest, but it was soon evident that he did not understand her, as a puzzled expression came to his face and he did not put her down as she asked. Instead he stood irresolute for a time, and then moved slowly through the jungle. By chance his direction was toward the camp, and this fact so relieved the girl's mind that presently she was far from loath to remain quietly in his arms.

After a moment she gained courage to look up into his face. She thought that she never had seen so marvellously clean cut features, or a more high and noble countenance, and she wondered how it was that this white man was upon the island and she not have known it. Possibly he was a new arrival--his presence unguessed even by her father. That he was neither English nor American was evident from the fact that he could not understand her native tongue. Who could he be! What was he doing upon their island!

As she watched his face he suddenly turned his eyes down upon her, and as she looked hurriedly away she was furious with herself as she felt a crimson flush mantle her cheek. The man only half sensed, in a vague sort of way, the meaning of the tell tale color and the quickly averted eyes; but he became suddenly aware of the pressure of her delicate body against his, as he had not been before. Now

he kept his eyes upon her face as he walked, and a new emotion filled his breast. He did not understand it, but it was very pleasant, and he knew that it was because of the radiant thing that he carried in his arms.

The scream that had startled von Horn and Professor Maxon led them along the trail toward the east coast of the island, and about halfway of the distance they stumbled upon the dazed and bloody Sing just as he was on the point of regaining consciousness.

"For God's sake, Sing, what is the matter?" cried von Horn. "Where is Miss Maxon?"

"Big blute, he catchem Linee. Tly kill Sing. Head hit tlee. No see any more. Wakee up--all glone," moaned the Chinaman as he tried to gain his feet.

"Which way did he take her?" urged von Horn.

Sing's quick eyes scanned the surrounding jungle, and in a moment, staggering to his feet, he cried, "Look see, klick! Foot plint!" and ran, weak and reeling drunkenly, along the broad trail made by the giant creature and its prey.

Von Horn and Professor Maxon followed closely in Sing's wake, the younger man horrified by the terrible possibilities that obtruded themselves into his imagination despite his every effort to assure himself that no harm could come to Virginia Maxon before they reached her. The girl's father had not spoken since they discovered that she was missing from the campong, but his face was white and drawn; his eyes wide and glassy as those of one whose mind is on the verge of madness from a great nervous shock.

The trail of the creature was bewilderingly erratic. A dozen paces straight through the underbrush, then a sharp turn at right angles for no apparent reason, only to veer again suddenly in a new direction! Thus, turning and twisting, the tortuous way led them toward the south end of the island, until Sing, who was in advance, gave a sharp cry of surprise.

"Klick! Look see!" he cried excitedly. "Blig blute dead--vely muchee dead."

Von Horn rushed forward to where the Chinaman was leaning over the body of Number One. Sure enough, the great brute lay motionless, its horrid face even more hideous in death than in life, if it were possible. The face was black, the tongue protruded, the skin was bruised from the heavy fists of his assailant and the thick skull crushed and splintered from terrific impact with the tree.

Professor Maxon leaned over von Horn's shoulder. "Ah, poor Number One," he sighed, "that you should have come to such an untimely end--my child, my child."

Von Horn looked at him, a tinge of compassion in his rather hard face. It touched the man that his employer was at last shocked from the obsession of his work to a realization of the love and duty he owed his daughter; he thought that the professor's last words referred to Virginia.

"Though there are twelve more," continued Professor Maxon, "you were my first born son and I loved you most, dear child."

The younger man was horrified.

"My God, Professor!" he cried. "Are you mad? Can you call this thing 'child' and mourn over it when you do not yet know the fate of your own daughter?"

Professor Maxon looked up sadly. "You do not understand, Dr. von Horn," he replied coldly, "and you will oblige me, in the future, by not again referring to the offspring of my labors as 'things.'"

With an ugly look upon his face von Horn turned his back upon the older man--what little feeling of loyalty and affection he had ever felt for him gone forever. Sing was looking about for evidences of the cause of Number One's death and the probable direction in which Virginia Maxon had disappeared.

"What on earth could have killed this enormous brute, Sing? Have you any idea?" asked von Horn.

The Chinaman shook his head.

"No savvy," he replied. "Blig flight. Look see," and he pointed to the torn and trampled turf, the broken bushes, and to one or two small trees that had been snapped off by the impact of the two mighty bodies that had struggled back and forth about the little clearing.

"This way," cried Sing presently, and started off once more into the brush, but this time in a northwesterly direction, toward camp.

In silence the three men followed the new trail, all puzzled beyond measure to account for the death of Number One at the hands of what must have been a creature of superhuman strength. What could it have been! It was impossible that any of the Malays or lascars could have done the thing, and there were no other creatures, brute or human, upon the island large enough to have coped even for an instant with the ferocious brutality of the dead monster, except--von

Horn's brain came to a sudden halt at the thought. Could it be? There seemed no other explanation. Virginia Maxon had been rescued from one soulless monstrosity to fall into the hands of another equally irresponsible and terrifying.

Others then must have escaped from the campong. Von Horn loosened his guns in their holsters, and took a fresh grip upon his bull whip as he urged Sing forward upon the trail. He wondered which one it was, but not once did it occur to him that the latest result of Professor Maxon's experiments could be the rescuer of Virginia Maxon. In his mind he could see only the repulsive features of one of the others.

Quite unexpectedly they came upon the two, and with a shout von Horn leaped forward, his bull whip upraised. Number Thirteen turned in surprise at the cry, and sensing a new danger for her who lay in his arms, he set her gently upon the ground behind him and advanced to meet his assailant.

"Out of the way, you--monstrosity," cried von Horn. "If you have harmed Miss Maxon I'll put a bullet in your heart!"

Number Thirteen did not understand the words that the other addressed to him but he interpreted the man's actions as menacing, not to himself, but to the creature he now considered his particular charge; and so he met the advancing man, more to keep him from the girl than to offer him bodily injury for he recognized him as one of the two who had greeted his first dawning consciousness.

Von Horn, possibly intentionally, misinterpreted the other's motive, and raising his bull whip struck Number Thirteen a vicious cut across the face, at the same time levelling his revolver point blank at the broad breast. But before ever he could pull the trigger an avalanche of muscle was upon him, and he went down to the rotting vegetation of the jungle with five sinewy fingers at his throat.

His revolver exploded harmlessly in the air, and then another hand wrenched it from him and hurled it far into the underbrush. Number Thirteen knew nothing of the danger of firearms, but the noise had startled him and his experience with the stinging cut of the bull whip convinced him that this other was some sort of instrument of torture of which it would be as well to deprive his antagonist.

Virginia Maxon looked on in horror as she realized that her rescuer was quickly choking Dr. von Horn to death. With a little cry she sprang to her feet and ran toward them, just as her father emerged from the underbrush through which he had been struggling in the trail of the agile Chinaman and von Horn. Placing her hand upon the great wrist of the giant she tried to drag his fingers from von

Horn's throat, pleading meanwhile with both voice and eyes for the life of the man she thought loved her.

Again Number Thirteen translated the intent without understanding the words, and releasing von Horn permitted him to rise. With a bound he was upon his feet and at the same instant brought his other gun from his side and levelled it upon the man who had released him; but as his finger tightened upon the trigger Virginia Maxon sprang between them and grasping von Horn's wrist deflected the muzzle of the gun just as the cartridge exploded. Simultaneously Professor Maxon sprang from his grasp and hurled him back with the superhuman strength of a maniac.

"Fool!" he cried. "What would you do? Kill--," and then of a sudden he realized his daughter's presence and the necessity for keeping the origin of the young giant from her knowledge.

"I am surprised at you, Dr. von Horn," he continued in a more level voice. "You must indeed have forgotten yourself to thus attack a stranger upon our island until you know whether he be friend or foe. Come! Escort my daughter to the camp, while I make the proper apologies to this gentleman." As he saw that both Virginia and von Horn hesitated, he repeated his command in a peremptory tone, adding; "Quick, now; do as I bid you."

The moment had given von Horn an opportunity to regain his self-control, and realizing as well as did his employer, but from another motive, the necessity of keeping the truth from the girl, he took her arm and led her gently from the scene. At Professor Maxon's direction Sing accompanied them.

Now in Number Thirteen's brief career he had known no other authority than Professor Maxon's, and so it was that when his master laid a hand upon his wrist he remained beside him while another walked away with the lovely creature he had thought his very own.

Until after dark the professor kept the young man hidden in the jungle, and then, safe from detection, led him back to the laboratory.