

## Chapter 5 - TREASON

On their return to camp after her rescue Virginia talked a great deal to von Horn about the young giant who had rescued her, until the man feared that she was more interested in him than seemed good for his own plans.

He had now cast from him the last vestige of his loyalty for his employer, and thus freed had determined to use every means within his power to win Professor Maxon's daughter, and with her the heritage of wealth which he knew would be hers should her father, through some unforeseen mishap, meet death before he could return to civilization and alter his will, a contingency which von Horn knew he might have to consider should he marry the girl against her father's wishes, and thus thwart the crazed man's mad, but no less dear project.

He realized that first he must let the girl fully understand the grave peril in which she stood, and turn her hope of protection from her father to himself. He imagined that the initial step in undermining Virginia's confidence in her father would be to narrate every detail of the weird experiments which Professor Maxon had brought to such successful issues during their residence upon the island.

The girl's own questioning gave him the lead he needed.

"Where could that horrid creature have come from that set upon me in the jungle and nearly killed poor Sing?" she asked.

For a moment von Horn was silent, in well simulated hesitancy to reply to her query.

"I cannot tell you, Miss Maxon," he said sadly, "how much I should hate to be the one to ignore your father's commands, and enlighten you upon this and other subjects which lie nearer to your personal welfare than you can possibly guess; but I feel that after the horrors of this day duty demands that I must lay all before you--you cannot again be exposed to the horrors from which you were rescued only by a miracle."

"I cannot imagine what you hint at, Dr. von Horn," said Virginia, "but if to explain to me will necessitate betraying my father's confidence I prefer that you remain silent."

"You do not understand," broke in the man, "you cannot guess the horrors that I have seen upon this island, or the worse horrors that are to come. Could you dream of what lies in store for you, you would seek death rather than face the future. I have been loyal to your father, Virginia, but were you not blind, or

indifferent, you would long since have seen that your welfare means more to me than my loyalty to him--more to me than my life or my honor.

"You asked where the creature came from that attacked you today. I shall tell you. It is one of a dozen similarly hideous things that your father has created in his mad desire to solve the problem of life. He has solved it; but, God, at what a price in misshapen, soulless, hideous monsters!"

The girl looked up at him, horror stricken.

"Do you mean to say that my father in a mad attempt to usurp the functions of God created that awful thing?" she asked in a low, faint voice, "and that there are others like it upon the island?"

"In the campong next to yours there are a dozen others," replied von Horn, "nor would it be easy to say which is the most hideous and repulsive. They are grotesque caricatures of humanity--without soul and almost without brain."

"God!" murmured the girl, burying her face in her hands, "he has gone mad; he has gone mad."

"I truly believe that he is mad," said von Horn, "nor could you doubt it for a moment were I to tell you the worst."

"The worst!" exclaimed the girl. "What could be worse than that which you already have divulged? Oh, how could you have permitted it?"

"There is much worse than I have told you, Virginia. So much worse that I can scarce force my lips to frame the words, but you must be told. I would be more criminally liable than your father were I to keep it from you, for my brain, at least, is not crazed. Virginia, you have in your mind a picture of the hideous thing that carried you off into the jungle?"

"Yes," and as the girl replied a convulsive shudder racked her frame.

Von Horn grasped her arm gently as he went on, as though to support and protect her during the shock that he was about to administer.

"Virginia," he said in a very low voice, "it is your father's intention to wed you to one of his creatures."

The girl broke from him with an angry cry.

"It is not true!" she exclaimed. "It is not true. Oh, Dr. von Horn how could you tell me such a cruel and terrible untruth."

"As God is my judge, Virginia," and the man reverently uncovered as he spoke, "it is the truth. Your father told me it in so many words when I asked his permission to pay court to you myself--you are to marry Number Thirteen when his education is complete."

"I shall die first!" she cried.

"Why not accept me instead?" suggested the man.

For a moment Virginia looked straight into his eyes as though to read his inmost soul.

"Let me have time to consider it, Doctor," she replied. "I do not know that I care for you in that way at all."

"Think of Number Thirteen," he suggested. "It should not be difficult to decide."

"I could not marry you simply to escape a worse fate," replied the girl. "I am not that cowardly--but let me think it over. There can be no immediate danger, I am sure."

"One can never tell," replied von Horn, "what strange, new vagaries may enter a crazed mind to dictate this moment's action or the next."

"Where could we wed?" asked Virginia.

"The Ithaca would bear us to Singapore, and when we returned you would be under my legal protection and safe."

"I shall think about it from every angle," she answered sadly, "and now good night, my dear friend," and with a wan smile she entered her quarters.

For the next month Professor Maxon was busy educating Number Thirteen. He found the young man intelligent far beyond his most sanguine hopes, so that the progress made was little short of uncanny.

Von Horn during this time continued to urge upon Virginia the necessity for a prompt and favorable decision in the matter of his proposal; but when it came time to face the issue squarely the girl found it impossible to accede to his request--she thought that she loved him, but somehow she dared not say the word that would make her his for life.

Bududreen, the Malay mate was equally harassed by conflicting desires, though of a different nature, for he had his eye upon the main chance that was represented to him by the great chest, and also upon the lesser reward which awaited him upon delivery of the girl to Rajah Muda Saffir. The fact that he could

find no safe means for accomplishing both these ends simultaneously was all that had protected either from his machinations.

The presence of the uncanny creatures of the court of mystery had become known to the Malay and he used this knowledge as an argument to foment discord and mutiny in the ignorant and superstitious crew under his command. By boring a hole in the partition wall separating their campong from the inner one he had disclosed to the horrified view of his men the fearsome brutes harbored so close to them. The mate, of course, had no suspicion of the true origin of these monsters, but his knowledge of the fact that they had not been upon the island when the Ithaca arrived and that it would have been impossible for them to have landed and reached the camp without having been seen by himself or some member of his company, was sufficient evidence to warrant him in attributing their presence to some supernatural and malignant power.

This explanation the crew embraced willingly, and with it Bududreen's suggestion that Professor Maxon had power to transform them all into similar atrocities. The ball once started gained size and momentum as it progressed. The professor's oftentimes strange expression was attributed to an evil eye, and every ailment suffered by any member of the crew was blamed upon their employer's Satanic influence. There was but one escape from the horrors of such a curse--the death of its author; and when Bududreen discovered that they had reached this point, and were even discussing the method of procedure, he added all that was needed to the dangerously smouldering embers of bloody mutiny by explaining that should anything happen to the white men he would become sole owner of their belongings, including the heavy chest, and that the reward of each member of the crew would be generous.

Von Horn was really the only stumbling block in Bududreen's path. With the natural cowardice of the Malay he feared this masterful American who never moved without a brace of guns slung about his hips; and it was at just this psychological moment that the doctor played into the hands of his subordinate, much to the latter's inward elation.

Von Horn had finally despaired of winning Virginia by peaceful court, and had about decided to resort to force when he was precipitately confirmed in his decision by a conversation with the girl's father.

He and the professor were talking in the workshop of the remarkable progress of Number Thirteen toward a complete mastery of English and the ways and manners of society, in which von Horn had been assisting his employer to train the young giant. The breach between the latter and von Horn had been patched over by Professor Maxon's explanations to Number Thirteen as soon as the young

man was able to comprehend--in the meantime it had been necessary to keep von Horn out of the workshop except when the giant was confined in his own room off the larger one.

Von Horn had been particularly anxious, for the furtherance of certain plans he had in mind, to effect a reconciliation with Number Thirteen, to reach a basis of friendship with the young man, and had left no stone unturned to accomplish this result. To this end he had spent considerable time with Number Thirteen, coaching him in English and in the ethics of human association.

"He is progressing splendidly, Doctor," Professor Maxon had said. "It will be but a matter of a day or so when I can introduce him to Virginia, but we must be careful that she has no inkling of his origin until mutual affection has gained a sure foothold between them."

"And if that should not occur?" questioned von Horn.

"I should prefer that they mated voluntarily," replied the professor, the strange gleam leaping to his eyes at the suggestion of possible antagonism to his cherished plan, "but if not, then they shall be compelled by the force of my authority--they both belong to me, body and soul."

"You will wait for the final consummation of your desires until you return with them to civilization, I presume," said von Horn.

"And why?" returned the professor. "I can wed them here myself--it would be the surer way--yes, that is what I shall do."

It was this determination on the part of Professor Maxon that decided von Horn to act at once. Further, it lent a reasonable justification for his purposed act.

Shortly after their talk the older man left the workshop, and von Horn took the opportunity to inaugurate the second move of his campaign. Number Thirteen was sitting near a window which let upon the inner court, busy with the rudiments of written English. Von Horn approached him.

"You are getting along nicely, Jack," he said kindly, looking over the other's shoulder and using the name which had been adopted at his suggestion to lend a more human tone to their relations with the nameless man.

"Yes," replied the other, looking up with a smile. "Professor Maxon says that in another day or two I may come and live in his own house, and again meet his beautiful daughter. It seems almost too good to be true that I shall actually live under the same roof with her and see her every day--sit at the same table with her--and walk with her among the beautiful trees and flowers that witnessed our

first meeting. I wonder if she will remember me. I wonder if she will be as glad to see me again as I shall be to see her."

"Jack," said von Horn, sadly, "I am afraid there is a terrible and disappointing awakening for you. It grieves me that it should be so, but it seems only fair to tell you, what Professor Maxon either does not know or has forgotten, that his daughter will not look with pleasure upon you when she learns your origin.

"You are not as other men. You are but the accident of a laboratory experiment. You have no soul, and the soul is all that raises man above the beasts. Jack, poor boy, you are not a human being--you are not even a beast. The world, and Miss Maxon is of the world, will look upon you as a terrible creature to be shunned--a horrible monstrosity far lower in the scale of creation than the lowest order of brutes.

"Look," and the man pointed through the window toward the group of hideous things that wandered aimlessly about the court of mystery. "You are of the same breed as those, you differ from them only in the symmetry of your face and features, and the superior development of your brain. There is no place in the world for them, nor for you.

"I am sorry that it is so. I am sorry that I should have to be the one to tell you; but it is better that you know it now from a friend than that you meet the bitter truth when you least expected it, and possibly from the lips of one like Miss Maxon for whom you might have formed a hopeless affection."

As von Horn spoke the expression on the young man's face became more and more hopeless, and when he had ceased he dropped his head into his open palms, sitting quiet and motionless as a carved statue. No sob shook his great frame, there was no outward indication of the terrible grief that racked him inwardly--only in the pose was utter dejection and hopelessness.

The older man could not repress a cold smile--it had had more effect than he had hoped.

"Don't take it too hard, my boy," he continued. "The world is wide. It would be easy to find a thousand places where your antecedents would be neither known nor questioned. You might be very happy elsewhere and there are a hundred thousand girls as beautiful and sweet as Virginia Maxon--remember that you have never seen another, so you can scarcely judge."

"Why did he ever bring me into the world?" exclaimed the young man suddenly. "It was wicked--wicked--terribly cruel and wicked."

"I agree with you," said von Horn quickly, seeing another possibility that would make his future plans immeasurably easier. "It was wicked, and it is still more wicked to continue the work and bring still other unfortunate creatures into the world to be the butt and plaything of cruel fate."

"He intends to do that?" asked the youth.

"Unless he is stopped," replied von Horn.

"He must be stopped," cried the other. "Even if it were necessary to kill him."

Von Horn was quite satisfied with the turn events had taken. He shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel toward the outer campong.

"If he had wronged me as he has you, and those others," with a gesture toward the court of mystery, "I should not be long in reaching a decision." And with that he passed out, leaving the door unlatched.

Von Horn went straight to the south campong and sought out Bududreen. Motioning the Malay to follow him they walked across the clearing and entered the jungle out of sight and hearing of the camp. Sing, hanging clothes in the north end of the clearing saw them depart, and wondered a little.

"Bududreen," said von Horn, when the two had reached a safe distance from the enclosures, "there is no need of mincing matters--something must be done at once. I do not know how much you know of the work that Professor Maxon has been engaged in since we reached this island; but it has been hellish enough and it must go no further. You have seen the creatures in the campong next to yours?"

"I have seen," replied Bududreen, with a shudder.

"Professor Maxon intends to wed one of these to his daughter," von Horn continued. "She loves me and we wish to escape--can I rely on you and your men to aid us? There is a chest in the workshop which we must take along too, and I can assure you that you all will be well rewarded for your work. We intend merely to leave Professor Maxon here with the creatures he has created."

Bududreen could scarce repress a smile--it was indeed too splendid to be true.

"It will be perilous work, Captain," he answered. "We should all be hanged were we caught."

"There will be no danger of that, Bududreen, for there will be no one to divulge our secret."

"There will be the Professor Maxon," urged the Malay. "Some day he will escape from the island, and then we shall all hang."

"He will never escape," replied von Horn, "his own creatures will see to that. They are already commencing to realize the horrible crime he has committed against them, and when once they are fully aroused there will be no safety for any of us. If you wish to leave the island at all it will be best for you to accept my proposal and leave while your head yet remains upon your shoulders. Were we to suggest to the professor that he leave now he would not only refuse but he would take steps to make it impossible for any of us to leave, even to sinking the Ithaca. The man is mad--quite mad--Bududreen, and we cannot longer jeopardize our own throats merely to humor his crazy and criminal whims."

The Malay was thinking fast, and could von Horn have guessed what thoughts raced through the tortuous channels of that semi-barbarous brain he would have wished himself safely housed in the American prison where he belonged.

"When do you wish to sail?" asked the Malay.

"Tonight," replied von Horn, and together they matured their plans. An hour later the second mate with six men disappeared into the jungle toward the harbor. They, with the three on watch, were to get the vessel in readiness for immediate departure.

After the evening meal von Horn sat on the verandah with Virginia Maxon until the Professor came from the workshop to retire for the night. As he passed them he stopped for a word with von Horn, taking him aside out of the girl's hearing.

"Have you noticed anything peculiar in the actions of Thirteen?" asked the older man. "He was sullen and morose this evening, and at times there was a strange, wild light in his eyes as he looked at me. Can it be possible that, after all, his brain is defective? It would be terrible. My work would have gone for naught, for I can see no way in which I can improve upon him."

"I will go and have a talk with him later," said von Horn, "so if you hear us moving about in the workshop, or even out here in the campong think nothing of it. I may take him for a long walk. It is possible that the hard study and close confinement to that little building have been too severe upon his brain and nerves. A long walk each evening may bring him around all right."

"Splendid--splendid," replied the professor. "You may be quite right. Do it by all means, my dear doctor," and there was a touch of the old, friendly, sane tone which had been so long missing, that almost caused von Horn to feel a trace of



compunction for the hideous act of disloyalty that he was on the verge of perpetrating.

As Professor Maxon entered the house von Horn returned to Virginia and suggested that they take a short walk outside the campong before retiring. The girl readily acquiesced to the plan, and a moment later found them strolling through the clearing toward the southern end of the camp. In the dark shadows of the gateway leading to the men's enclosure a figure crouched. The girl did not see it, but as they came opposite it von Horn coughed twice, and then the two passed on toward the edge of the jungle.