

Chapter 6 - TO KILL!

The Rajah Muda Saffir, tiring of the excuses and delays which Bududreen interposed to postpone the fulfillment of his agreement with the former, whereby he was to deliver into the hands of the rajah a certain beautiful maiden, decided at last to act upon his own initiative. The truth of the matter was that he had come to suspect the motives of the first mate of the Ithaca, and not knowing of the great chest attributed them to Bududreen's desire to possess the girl for himself.

So it was that as the second mate of the Ithaca with his six men waded down the bed of the little stream toward the harbor and the ship, a fleet of ten war prahus manned by over five hundred fierce Dyaks and commanded by Muda Saffir himself, pulled cautiously into the little cove upon the opposite side of the island, and landed but a quarter of a mile from camp.

At the same moment von Horn was leading Virginia Maxon farther and farther from the north campong where resistance, if there was to be any, would be most likely to occur. At his superior's cough Bududreen had signalled silently to the men within the enclosure, and a moment later six savage lascars crept stealthily to his side.

The moment that von Horn and the girl were entirely concealed by the darkness, the seven moved cautiously along the shadow of the palisade toward the north campong. There was murder in the cowardly hearts of several of them, and stupidity and lust in the hearts of all. There was no single one who would not betray his best friend for a handful of silver, nor any but was inwardly hoping and scheming to the end that he might alone possess both the chest and the girl.

It was such a pack of scoundrels that Bududreen led toward the north campong to bear away the treasure. In the breast of the leader was the hope that he had planted enough of superstitious terror in their hearts to make the sight of the supposed author of their imagined wrongs sufficient provocation for his murder; for Bududreen was too sly to give the order for the killing of a white man--the arm of the white man's law was too long--but he felt that he would rest easier were he to leave the island with the knowledge that only a dead man remained behind with the secret of his perfidy.

While these events were transpiring Number Thirteen was pacing restlessly back and forth the length of the workshop. But a short time before he had had his author--the author of his misery--within the four walls of his prison, and yet he had not wreaked the vengeance that was in his heart. Twice he had been on the

point of springing upon the man, but both times the other's eyes had met his and something which he was not able to comprehend had stayed him. Now that the other had gone and he was alone contemplation of the hideous wrong that had been done loosed again the flood gates of his pent rage.

The thought that he had been made by this man--made in the semblance of a human being, yet denied by the manner of his creation a place among the lowest of Nature's creatures--filled him with fury, but it was not this thought that drove him to the verge of madness. It was the knowledge, suggested by von Horn, that Virginia Maxon would look upon him in horror, as a grotesque and loathsome monstrosity.

He had no standard and no experience whereby he might classify his sentiments toward this wonderful creature. All he knew was that his life would be complete could he be near her always--see her and speak with her daily. He had thought of her almost constantly since those short, delicious moments that he had held her in his arms. Again and again he experienced in retrospection the exquisite thrill that had run through every fiber of his being at the sight of her averted eyes and flushed face. And the more he let his mind dwell upon the wonderful happiness that was denied him because of his origin, the greater became his wrath against his creator.

It was now quite dark without. The door leading to Professor Maxon's campong, left unlatched earlier in the evening by von Horn for sinister motives of his own, was still unbarred through a fatal coincidence of forgetfulness on the part of the professor.

Number Thirteen approached this door. He laid his hand upon the knob. A moment later he was moving noiselessly across the campong toward the house in which Professor Maxon lay peacefully sleeping; while at the south gate Bududreen and his six cutthroats crept cautiously within and slunk in the dense shadows of the palisade toward the workshop where lay the heavy chest of their desire. At the same instant Muda Saffir with fifty of his head-hunting Dyaks emerged from the jungle east of the camp, bent on discovering the whereabouts of the girl the Malay sought and bearing her away to his savage court far within the jungle fastness of his Bornean principality.

Number Thirteen reached the verandah of the house and peered through the window into the living room, where an oil lamp, turned low, dimly lighted the interior, which he saw was unoccupied. Going to the door he pushed it open and entered the apartment. All was still within. He listened intently for some slight sound which might lead him to the victim he sought, or warn him from the apartment of the girl or that of von Horn--his business was with Professor Maxon.

He did not wish to disturb the others whom he believed to be sleeping somewhere within the structure--a low, rambling bungalow of eight rooms.

Cautiously he approached one of the four doors which opened from the living room. Gently he turned the knob and pushed the door ajar. The interior of the apartment beyond was in inky darkness, but Number Thirteen's greatest fear was that he might have stumbled upon the sleeping room of Virginia Maxon, and that if she were to discover him there, not only would she be frightened, but her cries would alarm the other inmates of the dwelling.

The thought of the horror that his presence would arouse within her, the knowledge that she would look upon him as a terrifying monstrosity, added new fuel to the fires of hate that raged in his bosom against the man who had created him. With clenched fists, and tight set jaws the great, soulless giant moved across the dark chamber with the stealthy noiselessness of a tiger. Feeling before him with hands and feet he made the circuit of the room before he reached the bed.

Scarce breathing he leaned over and groped across the covers with his fingers in search of his prey--the bed was empty. With the discovery came a sudden nervous reaction that sent him into a cold sweat. Weakly, he seated himself upon the edge of the bed. Had his fingers found the throat of Professor Maxon beneath the coverlet they would never have released their hold until life had forever left the body of the scientist, but now that the highest tide of the young man's hatred had come and gone he found himself for the first time assailed by doubts.

Suddenly he recalled the fact that the man whose life he sought was the father of the beautiful creature he adored. Perhaps she loved him and would be unhappy were he taken away from her. Number Thirteen did not know, of course, but the idea obtruded itself, and had sufficient weight to cause him to remain seated upon the edge of the bed meditating upon the act he contemplated. He had by no means given up the idea of killing Professor Maxon, but now there were doubts and obstacles which had not been manifest before.

His standards of right and wrong were but half formed, from the brief attempts of Professor Maxon and von Horn to inculcate proper moral perceptions in a mind entirely devoid of hereditary inclinations toward either good or bad, but he realized one thing most perfectly--that to be a soulless thing was to be damned in the estimation of Virginia Maxon, and it now occurred to him that to kill her father would be the act of a soulless being. It was this thought more than another that caused him to pause in the pursuit of his revenge, since he knew that the act he contemplated would brand him the very thing he was, yet wished not to be.

At length, however, he slowly comprehended that no act of his would change the hideous fact of his origin; that nothing would make him acceptable in her eyes, and with a shake of his head he arose and stepped toward the living room to continue his search for the professor.

In the workshop Bududreen and his men had easily located the chest. Dragging it into the north campong the Malay was about to congratulate himself upon the ease with which the theft had been accomplished when one of his fellows declared his intention of going to the house for the purpose of dispatching Professor Maxon, lest the influence of his evil eye should overtake them with some terrible curse when the loss of the chest should be discovered.

While this met fully with Bududreen's plans he urged the man against any such act that he might have witnesses to prove that he not only had no hand in the crime, but had exerted his authority to prevent it; but when two of the men separated themselves from the party and crept toward the bungalow no force was interposed to stop them.

The moon had risen now, so that from the dark shadows of the palisade Muda Saffir and his savages watched the party with Bududreen squatting about the heavy chest, and saw the two who crept toward the house. To Muda Saffir's evil mind there was but one explanation. Bududreen had discovered a rich treasure, and having stolen that had dispatched two of his men to bring him the girl also.

Rajah Muda Saffir was furious. In subdued whispers he sent a half dozen of his Dyaks back beneath the shadow of the palisade to the opposite side of the bungalow where they were to enter the building, killing all within except the girl, whom they were to carry straight to the beach and the war prahus.

Then with the balance of his horde he crept alone in the darkness until opposite Bududreen and the watchers about the chest. Just as the two who crept toward the bungalow reached it, Muda Saffir gave the word for the attack upon the Malays and lascars who guarded the treasure. With savage yells they dashed upon the unsuspecting men. Parangs and spears glistened in the moonlight. There was a brief and bloody encounter, for the cowardly Bududreen and his equally cowardly crew had had no alternative but to fight, so suddenly had the foe fallen upon them.

In a moment the savage Borneo head hunters had added five grisly trophies to their record. Bududreen and another were racing madly toward the jungle beyond the campong.

As Number Thirteen arose to continue his search for Professor Maxon his quick ear caught the shuffling of bare feet upon the verandah. As he paused to listen

there broke suddenly upon the still night the hideous war cries of the Dyaks, and the screams and shrieks of their frightened victims in the campong without. Almost simultaneously Professor Maxon and Sing rushed into the living room to ascertain the cause of the wild alarm, while at the same instant Bududreen's assassins sprang through the door with upraised krisses, to be almost immediately followed by Muda Saffir's six Dyaks brandishing their long spears and wicked parangs.

In an instant the little room was filled with howling, fighting men. The Dyaks, whose orders as well as inclinations incited them to a general massacre, fell first upon Bududreen's lascars who, cornered in the small room, fought like demons for their lives, so that when the Dyaks had overcome them two of their own number lay dead beside the dead bodies of Bududreen's henchmen.

Sing and Professor Maxon stood in the doorway to the professor's room gazing upon the scene of carnage in surprise and consternation. The scientist was unarmed, but Sing held a long, wicked looking Colt in readiness for any contingency. It was evident the celestial was no stranger to the use of his deadly weapon, nor to the moments of extreme and sudden peril which demanded its use, for he seemed no more perturbed than had he been but hanging out his weekly wash.

As Number Thirteen watched the two men from the dark shadows of the room in which he stood, he saw that both were calm--the Chinaman with the calmness of perfect courage, the other through lack of full understanding of the grave danger which menaced him. In the eyes of the latter shone a strange gleam--it was the wild light of insanity that the sudden nervous shock of the attack had brought to a premature culmination.

Now the four remaining Dyaks were advancing upon the two men. Sing levelled his revolver and fired at the foremost, and at the same instant Professor Maxon, with a shrill, maniacal scream, launched himself full upon a second. Number Thirteen saw the blood spurt from a superficial wound in the shoulder of the fellow who received Sing's bullet, but except for eliciting a howl of rage the missile had no immediate effect. Then Sing pulled the trigger again and again, but the cylinder would not revolve and the hammer fell futilely upon the empty cartridge. As two of the head hunters closed upon him the brave Chinaman clubbed his weapon and went down beneath them beating madly at the brown skulls.

The man with whom Professor Maxon had grappled had no opportunity to use his weapons for the crazed man held him close with one encircling arm while he tore and struck at him with his free hand. The fourth Dyak danced around the two

with raised parang watching for an opening that he might deliver a silencing blow upon the white man's skull.

The great odds against the two men--their bravery in the face of death, their grave danger--and last and greatest, the fact that one was the father of the beautiful creature he worshipped, wrought a sudden change in Number Thirteen. In an instant he forgot that he had come here to kill the white-haired man, and with a bound stood in the center of the room--an unarmed giant towering above the battling four.

The parang of the Dyak who sought Professor Maxon's life was already falling as a mighty hand grasped the wrist of the head hunter; but even then it was too late to more than lessen the weight of the blow, and the sharp edge of the blade bit deep into the forehead of the white man. As he sank to his knees his other antagonist freed an arm from the embrace which had pinioned it to his side, but before he could deal the professor a blow with the short knife that up to now he had been unable to use, Number Thirteen had hurled his man across the room and was upon him who menaced the scientist.

Tearing him loose from his prey, he raised him far above his head and threw him heavily against the opposite wall, then he turned his attention toward Sing's assailants. All that had so far saved the Chinaman from death was the fact that the two savages were each so anxious to secure his head for the verandah rafters of his own particular long-house that they interfered with one another in the consummation of their common desire.

Although battling for his life, Sing had not failed to note the advent of the strange young giant, nor the part he had played in succoring the professor, so that it was with a feeling of relief that he saw the newcomer turn his attention toward those who were rapidly reducing the citadel of his own existence.

The two Dyaks who sought the trophy which nature had set upon the Chinaman's shoulders were so busily engaged with their victim that they knew nothing of the presence of Number Thirteen until a mighty hand seized each by the neck and they were raised bodily from the floor, shaken viciously for an instant, and then hurled to the opposite end of the room upon the bodies of the two who had preceded them.

As Sing came to his feet he found Professor Maxon lying in a pool of his own blood, a great gash in his forehead. He saw the white giant standing silently looking down upon the old man. Across the room the four stunned Dyaks were recovering consciousness. Slowly and fearfully they regained their feet, and seeing that no attention was being paid them, cast a parting, terrified look at the

mighty creature who had defeated them with his bare hands, and slunk quickly out into the darkness of the campong.

When they caught up with Rajah Muda Saffir near the beach, they narrated a fearful tale of fifty terrible white men with whom they had battled valiantly, killing many, before they had been compelled to retreat in the face of terrific odds. They swore that even then they had only returned because the girl was not in the house--otherwise they should have brought her to their beloved master as he had directed.

Now Muda Saffir believed nothing that they said, but he was well pleased with the great treasure which had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands, and he decided to make quite sure of that by transporting it to his own land--later he could return for the girl. So the ten war prahus of the Malay pulled quietly out of the little cove upon the east side of the island, and bending their way toward the south circled its southern extremity and bore away for Borneo.

In the bungalow within the north campong Sing and Number Thirteen had lifted Professor Maxon to his bed, and the Chinaman was engaged in bathing and bandaging the wound that had left the older man unconscious. The white giant stood beside him watching his every move. He was trying to understand why sometimes men killed one another and again defended and nursed. He was curious as to the cause of his own sudden change in sentiment toward Professor Maxon. At last he gave the problem up as beyond his powers of solution, and at Sing's command set about the task of helping to nurse the man whom he considered the author of his unhappiness and whom a few short minutes before he had come to kill.

As the two worked over the stricken man their ears were suddenly assailed by a wild commotion from the direction of the workshop. There were sounds of battering upon wood, loud growls and roars, mingled with weird shrieks and screams and the strange, uncanny gibbering of brainless things.

Sing looked quickly up at his companion.

"Whallee mallee?" he asked.

The giant did not answer. An expression of pain crossed his features, and he shuddered--but not from fear.