

Chapter 8 - THE SOUL OF NUMBER 13

Scarcely had the Ithaca cleared the reef which lies almost across the mouth of the little harbor where she had been moored for so many months than the tempest broke upon her in all its terrific fury. Bududreen was no mean sailor, but he was short handed, nor is it reasonable to suppose that even with a full crew he could have weathered the terrific gale which beat down upon the hapless vessel. Buffeted by great waves, and stripped of every shred of canvas by the force of the mighty wind that howled about her, the Ithaca drifted a hopeless wreck soon after the storm struck her.

Below deck the terrified girl clung desperately to a stanchion as the stricken ship lunged sickeningly before the hurricane. For half an hour the awful suspense endured, and then with a terrific crash the vessel struck, shivering and trembling from stem to stern.

Virginia Maxon sank to her knees in prayer, for this she thought must surely be the end. On deck Bududreen and his crew had lashed themselves to the masts, and as the Ithaca struck the reef before the harbor, back upon which she had been driven, the tall poles with their living freight snapped at the deck and went overboard carrying every thing with them amid shrieks and cries of terror that were drowned and choked by the wild tumult of the night.

Twice the girl felt the ship strike upon the reef, then a great wave caught and carried her high into the air, dropping her with a nauseating lunge which seemed to the imprisoned girl to be carrying the ship to the very bottom of the ocean. With closed eyes she clung in silent prayer beside her berth waiting for the moment that would bring the engulfing waters and oblivion--praying that the end might come speedily and release her from the torture of nervous apprehension that had terrorized her for what seemed an eternity.

After the last, long dive the Ithaca righted herself laboriously, wallowing drunkenly, but apparently upon an even keel in less turbulent waters. One long minute dragged after another, yet no suffocating deluge poured in upon the girl, and presently she realized that the ship had, at least temporarily, weathered the awful buffeting of the savage elements. Now she felt but a gentle roll, though the wild turmoil of the storm still came to her ears through the heavy planking of the Ithaca's hull.

For a long hour she lay wondering what fate had overtaken the vessel and whither she had been driven, and then, with a gentle grinding sound, the ship stopped, swung around, and finally came to rest with a slight list to starboard.

The wind howled about her, the torrential rain beat loudly upon her, but except for a slight rocking the ship lay quiet.

Hours passed with no other sounds than those of the rapidly waning tempest. The girl heard no signs of life upon the ship. Her curiosity became more and more keenly aroused. She had that indefinable, intuitive feeling that she was utterly alone upon the vessel, and at length, unable to endure the inaction and uncertainty longer, made her way to the companion ladder where for half an hour she futilely attempted to remove the hatch.

As she worked she failed to hear the scraping of naked bodies clambering over the ship's side, or the padding of unshod feet upon the deck above her. She was about to give up her work at the hatch when the heavy wooden cover suddenly commenced to move above her as though actuated by some supernatural power. Fascinated, the girl stood gazing in wide-eyed astonishment as one end of the hatch rose higher and higher until a little patch of blue sky revealed the fact that morning had come. Then the cover slid suddenly back and Virginia Maxon found herself looking into a savage and terrible face.

The dark skin was creased in fierce wrinkles about the eyes and mouth. Gleaming tiger cat's teeth curved upward from holes pierced to receive them in the upper half of each ear. The slit ear lobes supported heavy rings whose weight had stretched the skin until the long loop rested upon the brown shoulders. The filed and blackened teeth behind the loose lips added the last touch of hideousness to this terrible countenance.

Nor was this all. A score of equally ferocious faces peered down from behind the foremost. With a little scream Virginia Maxon sprang back to the lower deck and ran toward her stateroom. Behind her she heard the commotion of many men descending the companionway.

As Number Thirteen came into the campong after quitting the bungalow his heart was a chaos of conflicting emotions. His little world had been wiped out. His creator--the man whom he thought his only friend and benefactor--had suddenly turned against him. The beautiful creature he worshipped was either lost or dead; Sing had said so. He was nothing but a miserable THING. There was no place in the world for him, and even should he again find Virginia Maxon, he had von Horn's word for it that she would shrink from him and loathe him even more than another.

With no plans and no hopes he walked aimlessly through the blinding rain, oblivious of it and of the vivid lightning and deafening thunder. The palisade at length brought him to a sudden stop. Mechanically he squatted on his haunches

with his back against it, and there, in the midst of the fury of the storm he conquered the tempest that raged in his own breast. The murder that rose again and again in his untaught heart he forced back by thoughts of the sweet, pure face of the girl whose image he had set up in the inner temple of his being, as a gentle, guiding divinity.

"He made me without a soul," he repeated over and over again to himself, "but I have found a soul--she shall be my soul. Von Horn could not explain to me what a soul is. He does not know. None of them knows. I am wiser than all the rest, for I have learned what a soul is. Eyes cannot see it--fingers cannot feel it, but he who possess it knows that it is there for it fills his whole breast with a great, wonderful love and worship for something infinitely finer than man's dull senses can gauge--something that guides him into paths far above the plain of soulless beasts and bestial men.

"Let those who will say that I have no soul, for I am satisfied with the soul I have found. It would never permit me to inflict on others the terrible wrong that Professor Maxon has inflicted on me--yet he never doubts his own possession of a soul. It would not allow me to revel in the coarse brutalities of von Horn--and I am sure that von Horn thinks he has a soul. And if the savage men who came tonight to kill have souls, then I am glad that my soul is after my own choosing--I would not care for one like theirs."

The sudden equatorial dawn found the man still musing. The storm had ceased and as the daylight brought the surroundings to view Number Thirteen became aware that he was not alone in the campong. All about him lay the eleven terrible men whom he had driven from the bungalow the previous night. The sight of them brought a realization of new responsibilities. To leave them here in the campong would mean the immediate death of Professor Maxon and the Chinaman. To turn them into the jungle might mean a similar fate for Virginia Maxon were she wandering about in search of the encampment-- Number Thirteen could not believe that she was dead. It seemed too monstrous to believe that he should never see her again, and he knew so little of death that it was impossible for him to realize that that beautiful creature ever could cease to be filled with the vivacity of life.

The young man had determined to leave the camp himself--partly on account of the cruel words Professor Maxon had hurled at him the night before, but principally in order that he might search for the lost girl. Of course he had not the remotest idea where to look for her, but as von Horn had explained that they were upon a small island he felt reasonably sure that he should find her in time.

As he looked at the sleeping monsters near him he determined that the only solution of his problem was to take them all with him. Number Twelve lay closest to him, and stepping to his side he nudged him with the butt of the bull whip he still carried. The creature opened his dulleyes.

"Get up," said Number Thirteen.

Number Twelve rose, looking askance at the bull whip.

"We are not wanted here," said Number Thirteen. "I am going away and you are all going with me. We shall find a place where we may live in peace and freedom. Are you not tired of always being penned up?"

"Yes," replied Number Twelve, still looking at the whip.

"You need not fear the whip," said the young man. "I shall not use it on those who make no trouble. Wake the others and tell them what I have said. All must come with me--those who refuse shall feel the whip."

Number Twelve did as he was bid. The creatures mumbled among themselves for a few minutes. Finally Number Thirteen cracked his long whip to attract their attention.

"Come!" he said.

Nine of them shuffled after him as he turned toward the outer gate--only Number Ten and Number Three held back. The young man walked quickly to where they stood eyeing him sullenly. The others halted to watch--ready to spring upon their new master should the tide of the impending battle turn against him. The two mutineers backed away snarling, their hideous features distorted in rage.

"Come!" repeated Number Thirteen.

"We will stay here," growled Number Ten. "We have not yet finished with Maxon."

A loop in the butt of the bull whip was about the young man's wrist. Dropping the weapon from his hand it still dangled by the loop. At the same instant he launched himself at the throat of Number Ten, for he realized that a decisive victory now without the aid of the weapon they all feared would make the balance of his work easier.

The brute met the charge with lowered head and outstretched hands, and in another second they were locked in a clinch, tearing at one another like two great gorillas. For a moment Number Three stood watching the battle, and then he too sprang in to aid his fellow mutineer. Number Thirteen was striking heavy blows with his giant hands upon the face and head of his antagonist, while the long,

uneven fangs of the latter had found his breast and neck a half dozen times. Blood covered them both. Number Three threw his enormous weight into the conflict with the frenzy of a mad bull.

Again and again he got a hold upon the young giant's throat only to be shaken loose by the mighty muscles. The excitement of the conflict was telling upon the malformed minds of the spectators. Presently one who was almost brainless, acting upon the impulse of suggestion, leaped in among the fighters, striking and biting at Number Thirteen. It was all that was needed--another second found the whole monstrous crew upon the single man.

His mighty strength availed him but little in the unequal conflict--eleven to one were too great odds even for those powerful thews. His great advantage lay in his superior intelligence, but even this seemed futile in the face of the enormous weight of numbers that opposed him. Time and again he had almost shaken himself free only to fall once more--dragged down by hairy arms about his legs.

Hither and thither about the campong the battle raged until the fighting mass rolled against the palisade, and here, at last, with his back to the structure, Number Thirteen regained his feet, and with the heavy stock of the bull whip beat off, for a moment, those nearest him. All were winded, but when those who were left of the eleven original antagonists drew back to regain their breath, the young giant gave them no respite, but leaped among them with the long lash they had such good reason to hate and fear.

The result was as his higher intelligence had foreseen--the creatures scattered to escape the fury of the lash and a moment later he had them at his mercy. About the campong lay four who had felt the full force of his heavy fist, while not one but bore some mark of the battle.

Not a moment did he give them to recuperate after he had scattered them before he rounded them up once more near the outer gate--but now they were docile and submissive. In pairs he ordered them to lift their unconscious comrades to their shoulders and bear them into the jungle, for Number Thirteen was setting out into the world with his grim tribe in search of his lady love.

Once well within the jungle they halted to eat of the more familiar fruit which had always formed the greater bulk of their sustenance. Thus refreshed, they set out once more after the leader who wandered aimlessly beneath the shade of the tall jungle trees amidst the gorgeous tropic blooms and gay, songless birds--and of the twelve only the leader saw the beauties that surrounded them or felt the strange, mysterious influence of the untracked world they trod. Chance took them toward the west until presently they emerged upon the harbor's edge, where

from the matted jungle they overlooked for the first time the waters of the little bay and the broader expanse of strait beyond, until their eyes rested at last upon the blurred lines of distant Borneo.

From other vantage points at the jungle's border two other watchers looked out upon the scene. One was the lascar whom von Horn had sent down to the Ithaca the night before but who had reached the harbor after she sailed. The other was von Horn himself. And both were looking out upon the dismantled wreck of the Ithaca where it lay in the sand near the harbor's southern edge.

Neither ventured forth from his place of concealment, for beyond the Ithaca ten prahus were pulling gracefully into the quiet waters of the basin.

Rajah Muda Saffir, caught by the hurricane the preceding night as he had been about to beat across to Borneo, had scurried for shelter within one of the many tiny coves which indent the island's entire coast. It happened that his haven of refuge was but a short distance south of the harbor in which he knew the Ithaca to be moored, and in the morning he decided to pay that vessel a visit in the hope that he might learn something of advantage about the girl from one of her lascar crew.

The wily Malay had long refrained from pillaging the Ithaca for fear such an act might militate against the larger villainy he purposed perpetrating against her white owner, but when he rounded the point and came in sight of the stranded wreck he put all such thoughts from him and made straight for the helpless hulk to glean whatever of salvage might yet remain within her battered hull.

The old rascal had little thought of the priceless treasure hidden beneath the Ithaca's clean swept deck as he ordered his savage henchmen up her sides while he lay back upon his sleeping mat beneath the canopy which protected his vice-regal head from the blistering tropic sun.

Number Thirteen watched the wild head hunters with keenest interest as they clambered aboard the vessel. With von Horn he saw the evident amazement which followed the opening of the hatch, though neither guessed its cause. He saw the haste with which a half dozen of the warriors leaped down the companionway and heard their savage shouts as they pursued their quarry within the bowels of the ship.

A few minutes later they emerged dragging a woman with them. Von Horn and Number Thirteen recognized the girl simultaneously, but the doctor, though he ground his teeth in futile rage, knew that he was helpless to avert the tragedy. Number Thirteen neither knew nor cared.

"Come!" he called to his grotesque horde. "Kill the men and save the girl--the one with the golden hair," he added as the sudden realization came to him that none of these creatures ever had seen a woman before. Then he dashed from the shelter of the jungle, across the beach and into the water, his fearful pack at his heels.

The Ithaca lay now in about five feet of water, and the war prahus of Muda Saffir rode upon her seaward side, so that those who manned them did not see the twelve who splashed through the water from land. Never before had any of the rescuers seen a larger body of water than the little stream which wound through their campong, but accidents and experiments in that had taught them the danger of submerging their heads. They could not swim, but all were large and strong, so that they were able to push their way rapidly through the water to the very side of the ship.

Here they found difficulty in reaching the deck, but in a moment Number Thirteen had solved the problem by requiring one of the taller of his crew to stand close in by the ship while the others clambered upon his shoulders and from there to the Ithaca's deck.

Number Thirteen was the first to pull himself over the vessel's side, and as he did so he saw some half dozen Dyaks preparing to quit her upon the opposite side. They were the last of the boarding party--the girl was nowhere in sight. Without waiting for his men the young giant sprang across the deck. His one thought was to find Virginia Maxon.

At the sound of his approach the Dyak turned, and at the sight of a pajama clad white man armed only with a long whip they emitted savage cries of anticipation, counting the handsome trophy upon the white one's shoulders as already theirs. Number Thirteen would have paid no attention whatever to them had they not molested him, for he wished only to reach the girl's side as quickly as possible; but in another moment he found himself confronted by a half dozen dancing wild men, brandishing wicked looking parangs, and crying tauntingly.

Up went the great bull whip, and without abating his speed a particle the man leaped into the midst of the wicked blades that menaced him. Right and left with the quickness of thought the heavy lash fell upon heads, shoulders and sword arms. There was no chance to wield a blade in the face of that terrific onslaught, for the whip fell, not with the ordinary force of a man-held lash, but with all the stupendous power of those giant shoulders and arms behind it.

A single blow felled the foremost head hunter, breaking his shoulder and biting into the flesh and bone as a heavy sword bites. Again and again the merciless

leather fell, while in the boats below Muda Saffir and his men shouted loud cries of encouragement to their companions on the ship, and a wide-eyed girl in the stern of Muda Saffir's own prahu looked on in terror, hope and admiration at the man of her own race whom she felt was battling against all these odds for her alone.

Virginia Maxon recognized her champion instantly as he who had fought for her and saved her once before, from the hideous creature of her father's experiments. With hands tight pressed against her bosom the girl leaned forward, tense with excitement, watching every move of the lithe, giant figure, as, silhouetted against the brazen tropic sky, it towered above the dancing, shrieking head hunters who writhed beneath the awful lash.

Muda Saffir saw that the battle was going against his men, and it filled him with anger. Turning to one of his headmen he ordered two more boatloads of warriors to the Ithaca's deck. As they were rushing to obey their leader's command there was a respite in the fighting on the ship, for the three who had not fallen beneath the bull whip had leaped overboard to escape the fate which had overtaken their comrades.

As the reinforcements started to scale the vessel's side Number Thirteen's searching eyes found the girl in Muda Saffir's prahu, where it lay a little off from the Ithaca, and as the first of the enemy clambered over the rail she saw a smile of encouragement light the clear cut features of the man above her. Virginia Maxon sent back an answering smile--a smile that filled the young giant's heart with pride and happiness--such a smile as brave men have been content to fight and die for since woman first learned the art of smiling.

Number Thirteen could have beaten back many of the reinforcing party before they reached the deck, but he did not care to do so. In the spontaneous ethics of the man there seemed no place for an unfair advantage over an enemy, and added to this was his newly acquired love of battle, so he was content to wait until his foes stood on an even footing with him before he engaged them. But they never came within reach of his ready lash. Instead, as they came above the ship's side they paused, wide-eyed and terror stricken, and with cries of fear and consternation dropped precipitately back into the sea, shouting warnings to those who were about to scale the hull.

Muda Saffir arose in his prahu cursing and reviling the frightened Dyaks. He did not know the cause of their alarm, but presently he saw it behind the giant upon the Ithaca's deck--eleven horrible monstrosities lumbering forward, snarling and growling, to their leader's side.

At the sight his own dark countenance went ashen, and with trembling lips he ordered his oarsmen to pull for the open sea. The girl, too, saw the frightful creatures that surrounded the man upon the deck. She thought that they were about to attack him, and gave a little cry of warning, but in another instant she realized that they were his companions, for with him they rushed to the side of the ship to stand for a moment looking down upon the struggling Dyaks in the water below.

Two prahus lay directly beneath them, and into these the head hunters were scrambling. The balance of the flotilla was now making rapid headway under oars and sail toward the mouth of the harbor, and as Number Thirteen saw that the girl was being borne away from him, he shouted a command to his misshapen crew, and without waiting to see if they would follow him leaped into the nearer of the two boats beneath.

It was already half filled with Dyaks, some of whom were hastily manning the oars. Others of the head hunters were scrambling over the gunwale. In an instant pandemonium reigned in the little vessel. Savage warriors sprang toward the tall figure towering above them. Parangs flashed. The bull whip hissed and cracked, and then into the midst of it all came a horrid avalanche of fearful and grotesque monsters--the young giant's crew had followed at his command.

The battle in the prahu was short and fierce. For an instant the Dyaks attempted to hold their own, but in the face of the snarling, rending horde that engulfed them terror got the better of them all, so that those who were not overcome dived overboard and swam rapidly toward shore.

The other prahu had not waited to assist its companion, but before it was entirely filled had gotten under way and was now rapidly overhauling the balance of the fleet.

Von Horn had been an excited witness to all that had occurred upon the tranquil bosom of the little harbor. He had been filled with astonishment at sight of the inhabitants of the court of mystery fighting under the leadership of Number Thirteen, and now he watched interestedly the outcome of the adventure.

The sight of the girl being borne away in the prahu of the Malay rajah to a fate worse than death, had roused in him both keen regret and savage rage, but it was the life of ease that he was losing that concerned him most. He had felt so sure of winning Professor Maxon's fortune through either a forced or voluntary marriage with the girl that his feelings now were as of one whose rightful heritage has been foully wrested from him. The thought of the girl's danger and suffering

were of but secondary consideration to him, for the man was incapable of either deep love or true chivalry.

Quite the contrary were the emotions which urged on the soulless creature who now found himself in undisputed possession of a Dyak war prahu. His only thought was of the girl being rapidly borne away across the glimmering waters of the strait. He knew not to what dangers she was exposed, or what fate threatened her. All he knew was that she had been taken by force against her will. He had seen the look of terror in her eyes, and the dawning hope die out as the boat that carried her had turned rapidly away from the Ithaca. His one thought now was to rescue her from her abductors and return her to her father. Of his own reward or profit he entertained no single thought--it was enough if he could fight for her. That would be reward sufficient.

Neither Number Thirteen nor any of his crew had ever before seen a boat, and outside of the leader there was scarcely enough brains in the entire party to render it at all likely that they could ever navigate it, but the young man saw that the other prahus were being propelled by the long sticks which protruded from their sides, and he also saw the sails bellying with wind, though he had but a vague conception of their purpose.

For a moment he stood watching the actions of the men in the nearest boat, and then he set himself to the task of placing his own men at the oars and instructing them in the manner of wielding the unfamiliar implements. For an hour he worked with the brainless things that constituted his party. They could not seem to learn what was required of them. The paddles were continually fouling one another, or being merely dipped into the water and withdrawn without the faintest semblance of a stroke made.

The tiresome maneuvering had carried them about in circles back and forth across the harbor, but by it Number Thirteen had himself learned something of the proper method of propelling and steering his craft. At last, more through accident than intent, they came opposite the mouth of the basin, and then chance did for them what days of arduous endeavor upon their part might have failed to accomplish.

As they hung wavering in the opening, the broad strait before them, and their quarry fast diminishing to small specks upon the distant horizon, a vagrant land breeze suddenly bellied the flapping sail. The prahu swung quickly about with nose pointed toward the sea, the sail filled, and the long, narrow craft shot out of the harbor and sped on over the dancing waters in the wake of her sisters.

On shore behind them the infuriated Dyaks who had escaped to the beach danced and shrieked; von Horn, from his hiding place, looked on in surprised wonder, and Bududreen's lascar cursed the fate that had left a party of forty head hunters upon the same small island with him.

Smaller and smaller grew the retreating prahu as, straight as an arrow, she sped toward the dim outline of verdure clad Borneo.