

Chapter 10 - DESPERATE CHANCE

The great chest in the bottom of Rajah Muda Saffir's prahu had awakened in other hearts as well as his, blind greed and avarice; so that as it had been the indirect cause of his disaster it now proved the incentive to another to turn the mishap to his own profit, and to the final undoing of the Malay.

The panglima Ninaka of the Signana Dyaks who manned Muda Saffir's war prahu saw his chief disappear beneath the swift waters of the river, but the word of command that would have sent the boat hurriedly back to pick up the swimmer was not given. Instead a lusty cry for greater speed ahead urged the sinuous muscles gliding beneath the sleek brown hides; and when Muda Saffir rose to the surface with a cry for help upon his lips Ninaka shouted back to him in derision, consigning his carcass to the belly of the nearest crocodile.

In futile rage Muda Saffir called down the most terrible curses of Allah and his Prophet upon the head of Ninaka and his progeny to the fifth generation, and upon the shades of his forefathers, and upon the grim skulls which hung from the rafters of his long-house. Then he turned and swam rapidly toward the shore.

Ninaka, now in possession of both the chest and the girl, was rich indeed, but with Muda Saffir dead he scarce knew to whom he could dispose of the white girl for a price that would make it worth while to be burdened with the danger and responsibility of retaining her. He had had some experience of white men in the past and knew that dire were the punishments meted to those who wronged the white man's women. All through the remainder of the long night Ninaka pondered the question deeply. At last he turned to Virginia.

"Why does the big white man who leads the ourang outangs follow us?" he asked. "Is it the chest he desires, or you?"

"It is certainly not the chest," replied the girl. "He wishes to take me back to my father, that is all. If you will return me to him you may keep the chest, if that is what you wish."

Ninaka looked at her quizzically for a moment. Evidently then she was of some value. Possibly should he retain her he could wring a handsome ransom from the white man. He would wait and see, it were always an easy matter to rid himself of her should circumstances require. The river was there, deep, dark and silent, and he could place the responsibility for her loss upon Muda Saffir.

Shortly after day break Ninaka beached his prahu before the long-house of a peaceful river tribe. The chest he hid in the underbrush close by his boat, and with the girl ascended the notched log that led to the verandah of the structure, which, stretching away for three hundred yards upon its tall piles, resembled a huge centipede.

The dwellers in the long-house extended every courtesy to Ninaka and his crew. At the former's request Virginia was hidden away in a dark sleeping closet in one of the windowless living rooms which opened along the verandah for the full length of the house. Here a native girl brought her food and water, sitting, while she ate, in rapt contemplation of the white skin and golden hair of the strange female.

At about the time that Ninaka pulled his prahu upon the beach before the long-house, Muda Saffir from the safety of the concealing underbrush upon the shore saw a familiar war prahu forging rapidly up the stream. As it approached him he was about to call aloud to those who manned it, for in the bow he saw a number of his own men; but a second glance as the boat came opposite him caused him to alter his intention and drop further into the engulfing verdure, for behind his men squatted five of the terrible monsters that had wrought such havoc with his expedition, and in the stern he saw his own Barunda in friendly converse with the mad white man who had led them.

As the boat disappeared about a bend in the river Rajah Muda Saffir arose, shaking his fist in the direction it had vanished and, cursing anew and volubly, damned each separate hair in the heads of the faithless Barunda and the traitorous Ninaka. Then he resumed his watch for the friendly prahu, or smaller sampan which he knew time would eventually bring from up or down the river to his rescue, for who of the surrounding natives would dare refuse succor to the powerful Rajah of Sakkan!

At the long-house which harbored Ninaka and his crew, Barunda and Bulan stopped with theirs to obtain food and rest. The quick eye of the Dyak chieftain recognized the prahu of Rajah Muda Saffir where it lay upon the beach, but he said nothing to his white companion of what it augured--it might be well to discover how the land lay before he committed himself too deeply to either faction.

At the top of the notched log he was met by Ninaka, who, with horror-wide eyes, looked down upon the fearsome monstrosities that lumbered awkwardly up the rude ladder in the wake of the agile Dyaks and the young white giant.

"What does it mean?" whispered the panglima to Barunda.

"These are now my friends," replied Barunda. "Where is Muda Saffir?"

Ninaka jerked his thumb toward the river. "Some crocodile has feasted well," he said significantly. Barunda smiled.

"And the girl?" he continued. "And the treasure?"

Ninaka's eyes narrowed. "They are safe," he answered.

"The white man wants the girl," remarked Barunda. "He does not suspect that you are one of Muda Saffir's people. If he guessed that you knew the whereabouts of the girl he would torture the truth from you and then kill you. He does not care for the treasure. There is enough in that great chest for two, Ninaka. Let us be friends. Together we can divide it; otherwise neither of us will get any of it. What do you say, Ninaka?"

The panglima scowled. He did not relish the idea of sharing his prize, but he was shrewd enough to realize that Barunda possessed the power to rob him of it all, so at last he acquiesced, though with poor grace.

Bulan had stood near during this conversation, unable, of course, to understand a single word of the native tongue.

"What does the man say?" he asked Barunda. "Has he seen anything of the prahu bearing the girl?"

"Yes," replied the Dyak. "He says that two hours ago such a war prahu passed on its way up river--he saw the white girl plainly. Also he knows whither they are bound, and how, by crossing through the jungle on foot, you may intercept them at their next stop."

Bulan, suspecting no treachery, was all anxiety to be off at once. Barunda suggested that in case of some possible emergency causing the quarry to return down the river it would be well to have a force remain at the long-house to intercept them. He volunteered to undertake the command of this party. Ninaka, he said, would furnish guides to escort Bulan and his men through the jungle to the point at which they might expect to find Muda Saffir.

And so, with the girl he sought lying within fifty feet of him, Bulan started off through the jungle with two of Ninaka's Dyaks as guides--guides who had been well instructed by their panglima as to their duties. Twisting and turning through the dense maze of underbrush and close-growing, lofty trees the little party of eight plunged farther and farther into the bewildering labyrinth.

For hours the tiresome march was continued, until at last the guides halted, apparently to consult each other as to the proper direction. By signs they made known to Bulan that they did not agree upon the right course to pursue from there on, and that they had decided that it would be best for each to advance a little way in the direction he thought the right one while Bulan and his five creatures remained where they were.

"We will go but a little way," said the spokesman, "and then we shall return and lead you in the proper direction."

Bulan saw no harm in this, and without a shade of suspicion sat down upon a fallen tree and watched his two guides disappear into the jungle in opposite directions. Once out of sight of the white man the two turned back and met a short distance in the rear of the party they had deserted--in another moment they were headed for the long-house from which they had started.

It was fully an hour thereafter that doubts began to enter Bulan's head, and as the day dragged on he came to realize that he and his weird pack were alone and lost in the heart of a strange and tangled web of tropical jungle.

No sooner had Bulan and his party disappeared in the jungle than Barunda and Ninaka made haste to embark with the chest and the girl and push rapidly on up the river toward the wild and inaccessible regions of the interior. Virginia Maxon's strong hope of succor had been gradually waning as no sign of the rescue party appeared as the day wore on. Somewhere behind her upon the broad river she was sure a long, narrow native prahu was being urged forward in pursuit, and that in command of it was the young giant who was now never for a moment absent from her thoughts.

For hours she strained her eyes over the stern of the craft that was bearing her deeper and deeper into the wild heart of fierce Borneo. On either shore they occasionally passed a native long-house, and the girl could not help but wonder at the quiet and peace which reigned over these little settlements. It was as though they were passing along a beaten highway in the center of a civilized community; and yet she knew that the men who lolled upon the verandahs, puffing indolently upon their cigarettes or chewing betel nut, were all head hunters, and that along the verandah rafters above them hung the grisly trophies of their prowess.

Yet as she glanced from them to her new captors she could not but feel that she would prefer captivity in one of the settlements they were passing--there at least she might find an opportunity to communicate with her father, or be discovered by the rescue party as it came up the river. The idea grew upon her as the day

advanced until she spent the time in watching furtively for some means of escape should they but touch the shore momentarily; and though they halted twice her captors were too watchful to permit her the slightest opportunity for putting her plan into action.

Barunda and Ninaka urged their men on, with brief rests, all day, nor did they halt even after night had closed down upon the river. On, on the swift prahu sped up the winding channel which had now dwindled to a narrow stream, at intervals rushing strongly between rocky walls with a current that tested the strength of the strong, brown paddlers.

Long-houses had become more and more infrequent until for some time now no sign of human habitation had been visible. The jungle undergrowth was scantier and the spaces between the boles of the forest trees more open. Virginia Maxon was almost frantic with despair as the utter helplessness of her position grew upon her. Each stroke of those slender paddles was driving her farther and farther from friends, or the possibility of rescue. Night had fallen, dark and impenetrable, and with it had come the haunting fears that creep in when the sun has deserted his guardian post.

Barunda and Ninaka were whispering together in low gutturals, and to the girl's distorted and fear excited imagination it seemed possible that she alone must be the subject of their plotting. The prahu was gliding through a stretch of comparatively quiet and placid water where the stream spread out into a little basin just above a narrow gorge through which they had just forced their way by dint of the most laborious exertions on the part of the crew.

Virginia watched the two men near her furtively. They were deeply engrossed in their conversation. Neither was looking in her direction. The backs of the paddlers were all toward her. Stealthily she rose to a stooping position at the boat's side. For a moment she paused, and then, almost noiselessly, dove overboard and disappeared beneath the black waters.

It was the slight rocking of the prahu that caused Barunda to look suddenly about to discover the reason for the disturbance. For a moment neither of the men apprehended the girl's absence. Ninaka was the first to do so, and it was he who called loudly to the paddlers to bring the boat to a stop. Then they dropped down the river with the current, and paddled about above the gorge for half an hour.

The moment that Virginia Maxon felt the waters close above her head she struck out beneath the surface for the shore upon the opposite side to that toward which she had dived into the river. She knew that if any had seen her leave the prahu

they would naturally expect to intercept her on her way toward the nearest shore, and so she took this means of outwitting them, although it meant nearly double the distance to be covered.

After swimming a short distance beneath the surface the girl rose and looked about her. Up the river a few yards she caught the phosphorescent gleam of water upon the prahu's paddles as they brought her to a sudden stop in obedience to Ninaka's command. Then she saw the dark mass of the war-craft drifting down toward her.

Again she dove and with strong strokes headed for the shore. The next time that she rose she was terrified to see the prahu looming close behind her. The paddlers were propelling the boat slowly in her direction--it was almost upon her now--there was a shout from a man in the bow--she had been seen.

Like a flash she dove once more and, turning, struck out rapidly straight back beneath the oncoming boat. When she came to the surface again it was to find herself as far from shore as she had been when she first quitted the prahu, but the craft was now circling far below her, and she set out once again to retrace her way toward the inky mass of shore line which loomed apparently near and yet, as she knew, was some considerable distance from her.

As she swam, her mind, filled with the terrors of the night, conjured recollection of the stories she had heard of the fierce crocodiles which infest certain of the rivers of Borneo. Again and again she could have sworn that she felt some huge, slimy body sweep beneath her in the mysterious waters of this unknown river.

Behind her she saw the prahu turn back up stream, but now her mind was suddenly engaged with a new danger, for the girl realized that the strong current was bearing her down stream more rapidly than she had imagined. Already she could hear the increasing roar of the river as it rushed, wild and tumultuous, through the entrance to the narrow gorge below her. How far it was to shore she could not guess, or how far to the certain death of the swirling waters toward which she was being drawn by an irresistible force; but of one thing she was certain, her strength was rapidly waning, and she must reach the bank quickly.

With redoubled energy she struck out in one last mighty effort to reach the shore. The tug of the current was strong upon her, like a giant hand reaching up out of the cruel river to bear her back to death. She felt her strength ebbing quickly--her strokes now were feeble and futile. With a prayer to her Maker she threw her hands above her head in the last effort of the drowning swimmer to clutch at even thin air for support--the current caught and swirled her downward toward the

gorge, and, at the same instant her fingers touched and closed upon something which swung low above the water.

With the last flickering spark of vitality that remained in her poor, exhausted body Virginia Maxon clung to the frail support that a kind Providence had thrust into her hands. How long she hung there she never knew, but finally a little strength returned to her, and presently she realized that it was a pendant creeper hanging low from a jungle tree upon the bank that had saved her from the river's rapacious maw.

Inch by inch she worked herself upward toward the bank, and at last, weak and panting, sunk exhausted to the cool carpet of grass that grew to the water's edge. Almost immediately tired, Nature plunged her into a deep sleep. It was daylight when she awoke, dreaming that the tall young giant had rescued her from a band of demons and was lifting her in his arms to carry her back to her father.

Through half open lids she saw the sunlight filtering through the leafy canopy above her--she wondered at the realism of her dream; full consciousness returned and with it the conviction that she was in truth being held close by strong arms against a bosom that throbbed to the beating of a real heart.

With a sudden start she opened her eyes wide to look up into the hideous face of a giant orang outang.