

Chapter 14 -MAN OR MONSTER?

When Muda Saffir turned from the two Dyaks who had brought him news of the treasure he hastened to the long-house and arousing the chief of the tribe who domiciled there explained that necessity required that the rajah have at once two war prahus fully manned. Now the power of the crafty old Malay extended from one end of this great river on which the long-house lay to the other, and though not all the tribes admitted allegiance to him, yet there were few who would not furnish him with men and boats when he required them; for his piratical cruises carried him often up and down the stream, and with his savage horde it was possible for him to wreak summary and terrible vengeance upon those who opposed him.

When he had explained his wishes to the chief, the latter, though at heart hating and fearing Muda Saffir, dared not refuse; but to a second proposition he offered strong opposition until the rajah threatened to wipe out his entire tribe should he not accede to his demands.

The thing which the chief demurred to had occurred to Muda Saffir even as he walked back from the river after conversing with the two Dyak messengers. The thought of regaining the treasure, the while he administered punishment to the traitorous Ninaka, filled his soul with savage happiness. Now if he could but once more possess himself of the girl! And why not? There was only the sick old man, a Chinaman and von Horn to prevent it, and the chances were that they all were asleep.

So he explained to the chief the plan that had so suddenly sprung to his wicked mind.

"Three men with parangs may easily quiet the old man, his assistant and the Chinaman," he said, "and then we can take the girl along with us."

The chief refused at first, point-blank, to be a party to any such proceedings. He knew what had happened to the Sakkaran Dyaks after they had murdered a party of Englishmen, and he did not purpose laying himself and his tribe open to the vengeance of the white men who came in many boats and with countless guns and cannon to take a terrible toll for every drop of white blood spilled.

So it was that Muda Saffir was forced to compromise, and be satisfied with the chief's assistance in abducting the girl, for it was not so difficult a matter to convince the head hunter that she really had belonged to the rajah, and that she had been stolen from him by the old man and the doctor.

Virginia slept in a room with three Dyak women. It was to this apartment that the chief finally consented to dispatch two of his warriors. The men crept noiselessly within the pitch dark interior until they came to the sleeping form of one of the Dyak women. Cautiously they awoke her.

"Where is the white girl?" asked one of the men in a low whisper. "Muda Saffir has sent us for her. Tell her that her father is very sick and wants her, but do not mention Muda Saffir's name lest she might not come."

The whispering awakened Virginia and she lay wondering what the cause of the midnight conference might be, for she recognized that one of the speakers was a man, and there had been no man in the apartment when she had gone to sleep earlier in the night.

Presently she heard some one approach her, and a moment later a woman's voice addressed her; but she could not understand enough of the native tongue to make out precisely the message the speaker wished to convey. The words "father," "sick," and "come," however she finally understood after several repetitions, for she had picked up a smattering of the Dyak language during her enforced association with the natives.

The moment that the possibilities suggested by these few words dawned upon her, she sprang to her feet and followed the woman toward the door of the apartment. Immediately without the two warriors stood upon the verandah awaiting their victim, and as Virginia passed through the doorway she was seized roughly from either side, a heavy hand was clapped over her mouth, and before she could make even an effort to rebel she had been dragged to the end of the verandah, down the notched log to the ground and a moment later found herself in a war prahu which was immediately pushed into the stream.

Since Virginia had come to the long-house after her rescue from the ourang outangs, supposedly by von Horn, Rajah Muda Saffir had kept very much out of sight, for he knew that should the girl see him she would recognize him as the man who had stolen her from the Ithaca. So it came as a mighty shock to the girl when she heard the hated tones of the man whom she had knocked overboard from the prahu two nights before, and realized that the bestial Malay sat close beside her, and that she was again in his power. She looked now for no mercy, nor could she hope to again escape him so easily as she had before, and so she sat with bowed head in the bottom of the swiftly moving craft, buried in anguished thoughts, hopeless and miserable.

Along the stretch of black river that the prahu and her consort covered that night Virginia Maxon saw no living thing other than a single figure in a small sampan

which hugged the shadows of the shore as the two larger boats met and passed it, nor answered their hail.

Where von Horn and his two Dyak guides had landed, Muda Saffir's force disembarked and plunged into the jungle. Rapidly they hastened along the well known trail toward the point designated by the two messengers, to come upon the spot almost simultaneously with the party under Barunda's uncle, who, startled by the two shots several hours previously, had been cautiously searching through the jungle for an explanation of them.

They had gone warily for fear that they might stumble upon Ninaka's party before Muda Saffir arrived with reinforcements, and but just now had they discovered the prostrate forms of their two companions. One was dead, but the other was still conscious and had just sufficient vitality left after the coming of his fellows to whisper that they had been treacherously shot by the younger white man who had been at the long-house where they had found Muda Saffir--then the fellow expired without having an opportunity to divulge the secret hiding place of the treasure, over the top of which his body lay.

Now Bulan had been an interested witness of all that transpired. At first he had been inclined to come out of his hiding place and follow von Horn, but so much had already occurred beneath the branches of the great tree where the chest lay hidden that he decided to wait until morning at least, for he was sure that he had by no means seen the last of the drama which surrounded the heavy box. This belief was strengthened by the haste displayed by both Ninaka and von Horn to escape the neighborhood as quickly as possible, as though they feared that they might be apprehended should they delay even for a moment.

Number Three and Number Twelve still slept, not having been aroused even by the shots fired by von Horn. Bulan himself had dozed after the departure of the doctor, but the advent of Barunda's uncle with his followers had awakened him, and now he lay wide eyed and alert as the second party, under Muda Saffir, came into view when they left the jungle trail and entered the clearing.

His interest in either party was but passive until he saw the khaki blouse, short skirt and trim leggins of the captive walking between two of the Dyaks of Muda Saffir's company. At the same instant he recognized the evil features of the rajah as those of the man who had directed the abduction of Virginia Maxon from the wrecked Ithaca.

Like a great cat Bulan drew himself cautiously to all fours--every nerve and muscle taut with the excitement of the moment. Before him he saw a hundred and fifty ferocious Borneo head hunters, armed with parangs, spears and

sumpitan. At his back slept two almost brainless creatures--his sole support against the awful odds he must face before he could hope to succor the divinity whose image was enshrined in his brave and simple heart.

The muscles stood out upon his giant forearm as he gripped the stock of his bull whip. He believed that he was going to his death, for mighty as were his thews he knew that in the face of the horde they would avail him little, yet he saw no other way than to sit supinely by while the girl went to her doom, and that he could not do. He nudged Number Twelve. "Silence!" he whispered, and "Come! The girl is here. We must save her. Kill the men," and the same to the hairy and terrible Number Three.

Both the creatures awoke and rose to their hands and knees without noise that could be heard above the chattering of the natives, who had crowded forward to view the dead bodies of von Horn's victims. Silently Bulan came to his feet, the two monsters at his back rising and pressing close behind him. Along the denser shadows the three crept to a position in the rear of the natives. The girl's guards had stepped forward with the others to join in the discussion that followed the dying statement of the murdered warrior, leaving her upon the outer fringe of the crowd.

For an instant a sudden hope of escape sprang to Virginia Maxon's mind--there was none between her and the jungle through which they had just passed. Though unknown dangers lurked in the black and uncanny depths of the dismal forest, would not death in any form be far preferable to the hideous fate which awaited her in the person of the bestial Malay pirate?

She had turned to take the first step toward freedom when three figures emerged from the wall of darkness behind her. She saw the war-caps, shields, and war-coats, and her heart sank. Here were others of the rajah's party--stragglers who had come just in time to thwart her plans. How large these men were--she never had seen a native of such giant proportions; and now they had come quite close to her, and as the foremost stooped to speak to her she shrank back in fear. Then, to her surprise, she heard in whispered English; "Come quietly, while they are not looking."

She thought the voice familiar, but could not place it, though her heart whispered that it might belong to the young stranger of her dreams. He reached out and took her hand and together they turned and walked quickly toward the jungle, followed by the two who had accompanied him.

Scarcely had they covered half the distance before one of the Dyaks whose duty it had been to guard the girl discovered that she was gone. With a cry he alarmed

his fellows, and in another instant a sharp pair of eyes caught the movement of the four who had now broken into a run.

With savage shouts the entire force of head hunters sprang in pursuit. Bulan lifted Virginia in his arms and dashed on ahead of Number Twelve and Number Three. A shower of poisoned darts blown from half a hundred sumpitans fell about them, and then Muda Saffir called to his warriors to cease using their deadly blow-pipes lest they kill the girl.

Into the jungle dashed the four while close behind them came the howling pack of enraged savages. Now one closed upon Number Three only to fall back dead with a broken neck as the giant fingers released their hold upon him. A parang swung close to Number Twelve, but his own, which he had now learned to wield with fearful effect, clove through the pursuing warrior's skull splitting him wide to the breast bone.

Thus they fought the while they forced their way deeper and deeper into the dark mazes of the entangled vegetation. The brunt of the running battle was borne by the two monsters, for Bulan was carrying Virginia, and keeping a little ahead of his companions to insure the girl's greater safety.

Now and then patches of moonlight filtering through occasional openings in the leafy roofing revealed to Virginia the battle that was being waged for possession of her, and once, when Number Three turned toward her after disposing of a new assailant, she was horrified to see the grotesque and terrible face of the creature. A moment later she caught sight of Number Twelve's hideous face. She was appalled.

Could it be that she had been rescued from the Malay to fall into the hands of creatures equally heartless and entirely without souls? She glanced up at the face of him who carried her. In the darkness of the night she had not yet had an opportunity to see the features of the man, but after a glimpse at those of his two companions she trembled to think of the hideous thing that might be revealed to her.

Could it be that she had at last fallen into the hands of the dreaded and terrible Number Thirteen! Instinctively she shrank from contact with the man in whose arms she had been carried without a trace of repugnance until the thought obtruded itself that he might be the creature of her father's mad experimentation, to whose arms she had been doomed by the insane obsession of her parent.

The man shifted her now to give himself freer use of his right arm, for the savages were pressing more closely upon Twelve and Three, and the change made it impossible for the girl to see his face even in the more frequent moonlit places.

But she could see the two who ran and fought just behind them, and she shuddered at her inevitable fate. For should the three be successful in bearing her away from the Dyaks she must face an unknown doom, while should the natives recapture her there was the terrible Malay into whose clutches she had already twice fallen.

Now the head hunters were pressing closer, and suddenly, even as the girl looked directly at him, a spear passed through the heart of Number Three. Clutching madly at the shaft protruding from his misshapen body the grotesque thing stumbled on for a dozen paces, and then sank to the ground as two of the brown warriors sprang upon him with naked parangs. An instant later Virginia Maxon saw the hideous and grisly head swinging high in the hand of a dancing, whooping savage.

The man who carried her was now forced to turn and fight off the enemy that pressed forward past Number Twelve. The mighty bull whip whirled and cracked across the heads and faces of the Dyaks. It was a formidable weapon when backed by the Herculean muscles that rolled and shifted beneath Bulan's sun-tanned skin, and many were the brown warriors that went down beneath its cruel lash.

Virginia could see that the creature who bore her was not deformed of body, but she shrank from the thought of what a sight of his face might reveal. How much longer the two could fight off the horde at their heels the girl could not guess; and as a matter of fact she was indifferent to the outcome of the strange, running battle that was being waged with herself as the victor's spoil.

The country now was becoming rougher and more open. The flight seemed to be leading into a range of low hills, where the jungle grew less dense, and the way rocky and rugged. They had entered a narrow canyon when Number Twelve went down beneath a half dozen parangs. Again the girl saw a bloody head swung on high and heard the fierce, wild chorus of exulting victory. She wondered how long it would be ere the creature beneath her would add his share to the grim trophies of the hunt.

In the interval that the head hunters had paused to sever Number Twelve's head, Bulan had gained fifty yards upon them, and then, of a sudden, he came to a sheer wall rising straight across the narrow trail he had been following. Ahead there was no way--a cat could scarce have scaled that formidable barrier--but to the right he discerned what appeared to be a steep and winding pathway up the canyon's side, and with a bound he clambered along it to where it surmounted the rocky wall.

There he turned, winded, to await the oncoming foe. Here was a spot where a single man might defy an army, and Bulan had been quick to see the natural advantages of it. He placed the girl upon her feet behind a protruding shoulder of the canyon's wall which rose to a considerable distance still above them. Then he turned to face the mob that was surging up the narrow pathway toward him.

At his feet lay an accumulation of broken rock from the hillside above, and as a spear sped, singing, close above his shoulder, the occurrence suggested a use for the rough and jagged missiles which lay about him in such profusion. Many of the pieces were large, weighing twenty and thirty pounds, and some even as much as fifty. Picking up one of the larger Bulan raised it high above his head, and then hurled it down amongst the upclimbing warriors. In an instant pandemonium reigned, for the heavy boulder had mowed down a score of the pursuers, breaking arms and legs in its meteoric descent.

Missile after missile Bulan rained down upon the struggling, howling Dyaks, until, seized by panic, they turned and fled incontinently down into the depths of the canyon and back along the narrow trail they had come, and then superstitious fear completed the rout that the flying rocks had started, for one whispered to another that this was the terrible Bulan and that he had but lured them on into the hills that he might call forth all his demons and destroy them.

For a moment Bulan stood watching the retreating savages, a smile upon his lips, and then as the sudden equatorial dawn burst forth he turned to face the girl.

As Virginia Maxon saw the fine features of the giant where she had expected to find the grotesque and hideous lineaments of a monster, she gave a quick little cry of pleasure and relief.

"Thank God!" she cried fervently. "Thank God that you are a man--I thought that I was in the clutches of the hideous and soulless monster, Number Thirteen."

The smile upon the young man's face died. An expression of pain, and hopelessness, and sorrow swept across his features. The girl saw the change, and wondered, but how could she guess the grievous wound her words had inflicted?