

## Chapter 15 - TOO LATE

For a moment the two stood in silence; Bulan tortured by thoughts of the bitter humiliation that he must suffer when the girl should learn his identity; Virginia wondering at the sad lines that had come into the young man's face, and at his silence.

It was the girl who first spoke. "Who are you," she asked, "to whom I owe my safety?"

The man hesitated. To speak aught than the truth had never occurred to him during his brief existence. He scarcely knew how to lie. To him a question demanded but one manner of reply--the facts. But never before had he had to face a question where so much depended upon his answer. He tried to form the bitter, galling words; but a vision of that lovely face suddenly transformed with horror and disgust throttled the name in his throat.

"I am Bulan," he said, at last, quietly.

"Bulan," repeated the girl. "Bulan. Why that is a native name. You are either an Englishman or an American. What is your true name?"

"My name is Bulan," he insisted doggedly.

Virginia Maxon thought that he must have some good reason of his own for wishing to conceal his identity. At first she wondered if he could be a fugitive from justice--the perpetrator of some horrid crime, who dared not divulge his true name even in the remote fastness of a Bornean wilderness; but a glance at his frank and noble countenance drove every vestige of the traitorous thought from her mind. Her woman's intuition was sufficient guarantee of the nobility of his character.

"Then let me thank you, Mr. Bulan," she said, "for the service that you have rendered a strange and helpless woman."

He smiled.

"Just Bulan," he said. "There is no need for Miss or Mister in the savage jungle, Virginia."

The girl flushed at the sudden and unexpected use of her given name, and was surprised that she was not offended.

"How do you know my name?" she asked.

Bulan saw that he would get into deep water if he attempted to explain too much, and, as is ever the way, discovered that one deception had led him into another; so he determined to forestall future embarrassing queries by concocting a story immediately to explain his presence and his knowledge.

"I lived upon the island near your father's camp," he said. "I knew you all--by sight."

"How long have you lived there?" asked the girl. "We thought the island uninhabited."

"All my life," replied Bulan truthfully.

"It is strange," she mused. "I cannot understand it. But the monsters--how is it that they followed you and obeyed your commands?"

Bulan touched the bull whip that hung at his side.

"Von Horn taught them to obey this," he said.

"He used that upon them?" cried the girl in horror.

"It was the only way," said Bulan. "They were almost brainless--they could understand nothing else, for they could not reason."

Virginia shuddered.

"Where are they now--the balance of them?" she asked.

"They are dead, poor things," he replied, sadly. "Poor, hideous, unloved, unloving monsters--they gave up their lives for the daughter of the man who made them the awful, repulsive creatures that they were."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl.

"I mean that all have been killed searching for you, and battling with your enemies. They were soulless creatures, but they loved the mean lives they gave up so bravely for you whose father was the author of their misery--you owe a great deal to them, Virginia."

"Poor things," murmured the girl, "but yet they are better off, for without brains or souls there could be no happiness in life for them. My father did them a hideous wrong, but it was an unintentional wrong. His mind was crazed with dwelling upon the wonderful discovery he had made, and if he wronged them he contemplated a still more terrible wrong to be inflicted upon me, his daughter."

"I do not understand," said Bulan.

"It was his intention to give me in marriage to one of his soulless monsters--to the one he called Number Thirteen. Oh, it is terrible even to think of the hideousness of it; but now they are all dead he cannot do it even though his poor mind, which seems well again, should suffer a relapse."

"Why do you loathe them so?" asked Bulan. "Is it because they are hideous, or because they are soulless?"

"Either fact were enough to make them repulsive," replied the girl, "but it is the fact that they were without souls that made them totally impossible--one easily overlooks physical deformity, but the moral depravity that must be inherent in a creature without a soul must forever cut him off from intercourse with human beings."

"And you think that regardless of their physical appearance the fact that they were without souls would have been apparent?" asked Bulan.

"I am sure of it," cried Virginia. "I would know the moment I set my eyes upon a creature without a soul."

With all the sorrow that was his, Bulan could scarce repress a smile, for it was quite evident either that it was impossible to perceive a soul, or else that he possessed one.

"Just how do you distinguish the possessor of a soul?" he asked.

The girl cast a quick glance up at him.

"You are making fun of me," she said.

"Not at all," he replied. "I am just curious as to how souls make themselves apparent. I have seen men kill one another as beasts kill. I have seen one who was cruel to those within his power, yet they were all men with souls. I have seen eleven soulless monsters die to save the daughter of a man whom they believed had wronged them terribly--a man with a soul. How then am I to know what attributes denote the possession of the immortal spark? How am I to know whether or not I possess a soul?"

Virginia smiled.

"You are courageous and honorable and chivalrous--those are enough to warrant the belief that you have a soul, were it not apparent from your countenance that you are of the higher type of mankind," she said.

"I hope that you will never change your opinion of me, Virginia," said the man; but he knew that there lay before her a severe shock, and before him a great

sorrow when they should come to where her father was and the girl should learn the truth concerning him.

That he did not himself tell her may be forgiven him, for he had only a life of misery to look forward to after she should know that he, too, was equally a soulless monster with the twelve that had preceded him to a merciful death. He would have envied them but for the anticipation of the time that he might be alone with her before she learned the truth.

As he pondered the future there came to him the thought that should they never find Professor Maxon or von Horn the girl need never know but that he was a human being. He need not lose her then, but always be near her. The idea grew and with it the mighty temptation to lead Virginia Maxon far into the jungle, and keep her forever from the sight of men. And why not? Had he not saved her where others had failed? Was she not, by all that was just and fair, his?

Did he owe any loyalty to either her father or von Horn? Already he had saved Professor Maxon's life, so the obligation, if there was any, lay all against the older man; and three times he had saved Virginia. He would be very kind and good to her. She should be much happier and a thousand times safer than with those others who were so poorly equipped to protect her.

As he stood silently gazing out across the jungle beneath them toward the new sun the girl watched him in a spell of admiration of his strong and noble face, and his perfect physique. What would have been her emotions had she guessed what thoughts were his! It was she who broke the silence.

"Can you find the way to the long-house where my father is?" she asked.

Bulan, startled at the question, looked up from his reverie. The thing must be faced, then, sooner than he thought. How was he to tell her of his intention? It occurred to him to sound her first--possibly she would make no objection to the plan.

"You are anxious to return?" he asked.

"Why, yes, of course, I am," she replied. "My father will be half mad with apprehension, until he knows that I am safe. What a strange question, indeed." Still, however, she did not doubt the motives of her companion.

"Suppose we should be unable to find our way to the long-house?" he continued.

"Oh, don't say such a thing," cried the girl. "It would be terrible. I should die of misery and fright and loneliness in this awful jungle. Surely you can find your

way to the river--it was but a short march through the jungle from where we landed to the spot at which you took me away from that fearful Malay."

The girl's words cast a cloud over Bulan's hopes. The future looked less rosy with the knowledge that she would be unhappy in the life that he had been mapping for them. He was silent--thinking. In his breast a riot of conflicting emotions were waging the first great battle which was to point the trend of the man's character--would the selfish and the base prevail, or would the noble?

With the thought of losing her his desire for her companionship became almost a mania. To return her to her father and von Horn would be to lose her--of that there could be no doubt, for they would not leave her long in ignorance of his origin. Then, in addition to being deprived of her forever, he must suffer the galling mortification of her scorn.

It was a great deal to ask of a fledgling morality that was yet scarcely cognizant of its untried wings; but even as the man wavered between right and wrong there crept into his mind the one great and burning question of his life--had he a soul? And he knew that upon his decision of the fate of Virginia Maxon rested to some extent the true answer to that question, for, unconsciously, he had worked out his own crude soul hypothesis which imparted to this invisible entity the power to direct his actions only for good. Therefore he reasoned that wickedness presupposed a small and worthless soul, or the entire lack of one.

That she would hate a soulless creature he accepted as a foregone conclusion. He desired her respect, and that fact helped him to his final decision, but the thing that decided him was born of the truly chivalrous nature he possessed--he wanted Virginia Maxon to be happy; it mattered not at what cost to him.

The girl had been watching him closely as he stood silently thinking after her last words. She did not know the struggle that the calm face hid; yet she felt that the dragging moments were big with the question of her fate.

"Well?" she said at length.

"We must eat first," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone, and not at all as though he was about to renounce his life's happiness, "and then we shall set out in search of your father. I shall take you to him, Virginia, if man can find him."

"I knew that you could," she said, simply, "but how my father and I ever can repay you I do not know--do you?"

"Yes," said Bulan, and there was a sudden rush of fire to his eyes that kept Virginia Maxon from urging a detailed explanation of just how she might repay him.

In truth she did not know whether to be angry, or frightened, or glad of the truth that she read there; or mortified that it had awakened in her a realization that possibly an analysis of her own interest in this young stranger might reveal more than she had imagined.

The constraint that suddenly fell upon them was relieved when Bulan motioned her to follow him back down the trail into the gorge in search of food. There they sat together upon a fallen tree beside a tiny rivulet, eating the fruit that the man gathered. Often their eyes met as they talked, but always the girl's fell before the open worship of the man's.

Many were the men who had looked in admiration at Virginia Maxon in the past, but never, she felt, with eyes so clean and brave and honest. There was no guile or evil in them, and because of it she wondered all the more that she could not face them.

"What a wonderful soul those eyes portray," she thought, "and how perfectly they assure the safety of my life and honor while their owner is near me."

And the man thought: "Would that I owned a soul that I might aspire to live always near her--always to protect her."

When they had eaten the two set out once more in search of the river, and the confidence that is born of ignorance was theirs, so that beyond each succeeding tangled barrier of vines and creepers they looked to see the swirling stream that would lead them to the girl's father.

On and on they trudged, the man often carrying the girl across the rougher obstacles and through the little streams that crossed their path, until at last came noon, and yet no sign of the river they sought. The combined jungle craft of the two had been insufficient either to trace the way that they had come, or point the general direction of the river.

As the afternoon drew to a close Virginia Maxon commenced to lose heart--she was confident that they were lost. Bulan made no pretence of knowing the way, the most that he would say being that eventually they must come to the river. As a matter-of-fact had it not been for the girl's evident concern he would have been glad to know that they were irretrievably lost; but for her sake his efforts to find the river were conscientious.

When at last night closed down upon them the girl was, at heart, terror stricken, but she hid her true state from the man, because she knew that their plight was no fault of his. The strange and uncanny noises of the jungle night filled her with the most dreadful forebodings, and when a cold, drizzling rain set in upon them her cup of misery was full.

Bulan rigged a rude shelter for her, making her lie down beneath it, and then he removed his Dyak war-coat and threw it over her, but it was hours before her exhausted body overpowered her nervous fright and won a fitful and restless slumber. Several times Virginia became obsessed with the idea that Bulan had left her alone there in the jungle, but when she called his name he answered from close beside her shelter.

She thought that he had reared another for himself nearby, but even the thought that he might sleep filled her with dread, yet she would not call to him again, since she knew that he needed his rest even more than she. And all the night Bulan stood close beside the woman he had learned to love--stood almost naked in the chill night air and the cold rain, lest some savage man or beast creep out of the darkness after her while he slept.

The next day with its night, and the next, and the next were but repetitions of the first. It had become an agony of suffering for the man to fight off sleep longer. The girl read part of the truth in his heavy eyes and worn face, and tried to force him to take needed rest, but she did not guess that he had not slept for four days and nights.

At last abused Nature succumbed to the terrific strain that had been put upon her, and the giant constitution of the man went down before the cold and the wet, weakened and impoverished by loss of sleep and insufficient food; for through the last two days he had been able to find but little, and that little he had given to the girl, telling her that he had eaten his fill while he gathered hers.

It was on the fifth morning, when Virginia awoke, that she found Bulan rolling and tossing upon the wet ground before her shelter, delirious with fever. At the sight of the mighty figure reduced to pitiable inefficiency and weakness, despite the knowledge that her protector could no longer protect, the fear of the jungle faded from the heart of the young girl--she was no more a weak and trembling daughter of an effete civilization. Instead she was a lioness, watching over and protecting her sick mate. The analogy did not occur to her, but something else did as she saw the flushed face and fever wracked body of the man whose appeal to her she would have thought purely physical had she given the subject any analytic consideration; and as a realization of his utter helplessness came to her she bent over him and kissed first his forehead and then his lips.

"What a noble and unselfish love yours has been," she murmured. "You have even tried to hide it that my position might be the easier to bear, and now that it may be too late I learn that I love you--that I have always loved you. Oh, Bulan, my Bulan, what a cruel fate that permitted us to find one another only to die together!"