

Chapter 17 - 999 PRISCILLA

As the cutter touched the bank the entire party from the long-house, whites and natives, were gathered on the shore to meet it. At first the officers held off as though fearing a hostile demonstration, but when they saw the whites among the throng, a command was given to pull in, and a moment later one of the officers stepped ashore.

"I am Lieutenant May," he said, "of the U.S.S. New Mexico, flagship of the Pacific Fleet. Have I the honor to address Professor Maxon?"

The scientist nodded. "I am delighted," he said.

"We have been to your island, Professor," continued the officer, "and judging from the evidences of hasty departure, and the corpses of several natives there, I feared that some harm had befallen you. We therefore cruised along the Bornean coast making inquiries of the natives until at last we found one who had heard a rumor of a party of whites being far in the interior searching for a white girl who had been stolen from them by pirates.

"The farther up this river we have come the greater our assurance that we were on the right trail, for scarcely a native we interrogated but had seen or heard of some of your party. Mixed with the truth they told us were strange tales of terrible monsters led by a gigantic white man."

"The imaginings of childish minds," said the professor. "However, why, my dear lieutenant, did you honor me by visiting my island?"

The officer hesitated a moment before answering, his eyes running about over the assembly as though in search of someone.

"Well, Professor Maxon, to be quite frank," he said at length, "we learned at Singapore the personnel of your party, which included a former naval officer whom we have been seeking for many years. We came to your island to arrest this man--I refer to Doctor Carl von Horn."

When the lieutenant learned of the recent disappearance of the man he sought, he expressed his determination to push on at once in pursuit; and as Professor Maxon feared again to remain unprotected in the heart of the Bornean wilderness his entire party was taken aboard the cutter.

A few miles up the river they came upon one of the Dyaks who had accompanied von Horn, a few hours earlier. The warrior sat smoking beside a beached prahu. When interrogated he explained that von Horn and the balance of his crew had

gone inland, leaving him to guard the boat. He said that he thought he could guide them to the spot where the white man might be found.

Professor Maxon and Sing accompanied one of the officers and a dozen sailors in the wake of the Dyak guide. Virginia and Bulan remained in the cutter, as the latter was still too weak to attempt the hard march through the jungle. For an hour the party traversed the trail in the wake of von Horn and his savage companions. They had come almost to the spot when their ears were assailed by the weird and blood curdling yells of native warriors, and a moment later von Horn's escort dashed into view in full retreat.

At sight of the white men they halted in relief, pointing back in the direction they had come, and jabbering excitedly in their native tongue. Warily the party advanced again behind these new guides; but when they reached the spot they sought, the cause of the Dyaks' panic had fled, warned, doubtless, by their trained ears of the approach of an enemy.

The sight that met the eyes of the searchers told all of the story that they needed to know. A hole had been excavated in the ground, partially uncovering a heavy chest, and across this chest lay the headless body of Doctor Carl von Horn.

Lieutenant May turned toward Professor Maxon with a questioning look.

"It is he," said the scientist.

"But the chest?" inquired the officer.

"Maxon's treasure," spoke up Sing Lee. "Hornee him tly steal it for long time."

"Treasure!" ejaculated the professor. "Bududreen gave up his life for this. Rajah Muda Saffir fought and intrigued and murdered for possession of it! Poor, misguided von Horn has died for it, and left his head to wither beneath the rafters of a Dyak long-house! It is incredible."

"But, Professor Maxon," said Lieutenant May, "men will suffer all these things and more for gold."

"Gold!" cried the professor. "Why, man, that is a box of books on biology and eugenics."

"My God!" exclaimed May, "and von Horn was accredited to be one of the shrewdest swindlers and adventurers in America! But come, we may as well return to the cutter--my men will carry the chest."

"No!" exclaimed Professor Maxon with a vehemence the other could not understand. "Let them bury it again where it lies. It and what it contains have

been the cause of sufficient misery and suffering and crime. Let it lie where it is in the heart of savage Borneo, and pray to God that no man ever finds it, and that I shall forget forever that which is in it."

On the morning of the third day following the death of von Horn the New Mexico steamed away from the coast of Borneo. Upon her deck, looking back toward the verdure clad hills, stood Virginia and Bulan.

"Thank heaven," exclaimed the girl fervently, "that we are leaving it behind us forever."

"Amen," replied Bulan, "but yet, had it not been for Borneo I might never have found you."

"We should have met elsewhere then, Bulan," said the girl in a low voice, "for we were made for one another. No power on earth could have kept us apart. In your true guise you would have found me--I am sure of it."

"It is maddening, Virginia," said the man, "to be constantly straining every resource of my memory in futile endeavor to catch and hold one fleeting clue to my past. Why, dear, do you realize that I may have been a fugitive from justice, as was von Horn, a vile criminal perhaps. It is awful, Virginia, to contemplate the horrible possibilities of my lost past."

"No, Bulan, you could never have been a criminal," replied the loyal girl, "but there is one possibility that has been haunting me constantly. It frightens me just to think of it--it is," and the girl lowered her voice as though she feared to say the thing she dreaded most, "it is that you may have loved another--that--that you may even be married."

Bulan was about to laugh away any such fears when the gravity and importance of the possibility impressed him quite as fully as it had Virginia. He saw that it was not at all unlikely that he was already a married man; and he saw too what the girl now acknowledged, that they might never wed until the mystery of his past had been cleared away.

"There is something that gives weight to my fear," continued Virginia, "something that I had almost forgotten in the rush and excitement of events during the past few days. During your delirium your ravings were, for the most part, quite incoherent, but there was one name that you repeated many times--a woman's name, preceded by a number. It was 'Nine ninety nine Priscilla.' Maybe she--"

But Virginia got no further. With a low exclamation of delight Bulan caught her in his arms.

"It is all right, dear," he cried. "It is all right. Everything has come back to me now. You have given me the clue. Nine ninety nine Priscilla is my father's address--Nine ninety nine Priscilla Avenue.

"I am Townsend J. Harper, Jr. You have heard of my father. Every one has since he commenced consolidating interurban traction companies. And I'm not married, Virginia, and never have been; but I shall be if this miserable old mud scow ever reaches Singapore."

"Oh, Bulan," cried the girl, "how in the world did you ever happen to come to that terrible island of ours?"

"I came for you, dear," he replied. "It is a long story. After dinner I will tell you all of it that I can recall. For the present it must suffice you to know that I followed you from the railway station at Ithaca half around the world for a love that had been born from a single glance at your sweet face as you passed me to enter your Pullman.

"On my father's yacht I reached your island after trailing you to Singapore. It was a long and tedious hunt and we followed many blind leads, but at last we came off an island upon which natives had told us such a party as yours was living. Five of us put off in a boat to explore--that is the last that I can recall. Sing says he found me alone in a row boat, a 'dummy.'"

Virginia sighed, and crept closer to him.

"You may be the son of the great Townsend J. Harper, you have been the soulless Number Thirteen; but to me you will always be Bulan, for it was Bulan whom I learned to love."