

The Monster Men

by

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Chapter 1. The Rift

As he dropped the last grisly fragment of the dismembered and mutilated body into the small vat of nitric acid that was to devour every trace of the horrid evidence which might easily send him to the gallows, the man sank weakly into a chair and throwing his body forward upon his great, teak desk buried his face in his arms, breaking into dry, moaning sobs.

Beads of perspiration followed the seams of his high, wrinkled forehead, replacing the tears which might have lessened the pressure upon his overwrought nerves. His slender frame shook, as with ague, and at times was racked by a convulsive shudder. A sudden step upon the stairway leading to his workshop brought him trembling and wide eyed to his feet, staring fearfully at the locked and bolted door.

Although he knew perfectly well whose the advancing footfalls were, he was all but overcome by the madness of apprehension as they came softly nearer and nearer to the barred door. At last they halted before it, to be followed by a gentle knock.

"Daddy!" came the sweet tones of a girl's voice.

The man made an effort to take a firm grasp upon himself that no tell-tale evidence of his emotion might be betrayed in his speech.

"Daddy!" called the girl again, a trace of anxiety in her voice this time. "What IS the matter with you, and what ARE you doing? You've been shut up in that hateful old room for three days now without a morsel to eat, and in all likelihood without a wink of sleep. You'll kill yourself with your stuffy old experiments."

The man's face softened.

"Don't worry about me, sweetheart," he replied in a well controlled voice. "I'll soon be through now--soon be through--and then we'll go away for a long vacation-- for a long vacation."

"I'll give you until noon, Daddy," said the girl in a voice which carried a more strongly defined tone of authority than her father's soft drawl, "and then I shall come into that room, if I have to use an axe, and bring you out--do you understand?"

Professor Maxon smiled wanly. He knew that his daughter was equal to her threat.

"All right, sweetheart, I'll be through by noon for sure--by noon for sure. Run along and play now, like a good little girl."

Virginia Maxon shrugged her shapely shoulders and shook her head hopelessly at the forbidding panels of the door.

"My dolls are all dressed for the day," she cried, "and I'm tired of making mud pies--I want you to come out and play with me." But Professor Maxon did not reply-- he had returned to view his grim operations, and the hideousness of them had closed his ears to the sweet tones of the girl's voice.

As she turned to retrace her steps to the floor below Miss Maxon still shook her head.

"Poor old Daddy," she mused, "were I a thousand years old, wrinkled and toothless, he would still look upon me as his baby girl."

If you chance to be an alumnus of Cornell you may recall Professor Arthur Maxon, a quiet, slender, white-haired gentleman, who for several years was an assistant professor in one of the departments of natural science. Wealthy by inheritance, he had chosen the field of education for his life work solely from a desire to be of some material benefit to mankind since the meager salary which accompanied his professorship was not of sufficient import to influence him in the slightest degree.

Always keenly interested in biology, his almost unlimited means had permitted him to undertake, in secret, a series of daring experiments which had carried him so far in advance of the biologists of his day that he had, while others were still groping blindly for the secret of life, actually reproduced by chemical means the great phenomenon.

Fully alive to the gravity and responsibilities of his marvellous discovery he had kept the results of his experimentation, and even the experiments themselves, a profound secret not only from his colleagues, but from his only daughter, who heretofore had shared his every hope and aspiration.

It was the very success of his last and most pretentious effort that had placed him in the horrifying predicament in which he now found himself-- with the corpse of what was apparently a human being in his workshop and no available explanation that could possibly be acceptable to a matter-of-fact and unscientific police.

Had he told them the truth they would have laughed at him. Had he said: "This is not a human being that you see, but the remains of a chemically produced counterfeit created in my own laboratory," they would have smiled, and either hanged him or put him away with the other criminally insane.

This phase of the many possibilities which he had realized might be contingent upon even the partial success of his work alone had escaped his consideration, so that the first wave of triumphant exultation with which he had viewed the finished result of this last experiment had been succeeded by overwhelming consternation as he saw the thing which he had created gasp once or twice with the feeble spark of life with which he had endowed it, and expire--leaving upon his hands the corpse of what was, to all intent and purpose, a human being, albeit a most grotesque and misshapen thing.

Until nearly noon Professor Maxon was occupied in removing the remaining stains and evidences of his gruesome work, but when he at last turned the key in the door of his workshop it was to leave behind no single trace of the successful result of his years of labor.

The following afternoon found him and Virginia crossing the station platform to board the express for New York. So quietly had their plans been made that not a friend was at the train to bid them farewell--the scientist felt that he could not bear the strain of attempting explanations at this time.

But there were those there who recognized them, and one especially who noted the lithe, trim figure and beautiful face of Virginia Maxon though he did not know even the name of their possessor. It was a tall well built young man who nudged one of his younger companions as the girl crossed the platform to enter her Pullman.

"I say, Dexter," he exclaimed, "who is that beauty?"

The one addressed turned in the direction indicated by his friend.

"By jove!" he exclaimed. "Why it's Virginia Maxon and the professor, her father. Now where do you suppose they're going?"

"I don't know--now," replied the first speaker, Townsend J. Harper, Jr., in a half whisper, "but I'll bet you a new car that I find out."

A week later, with failing health and shattered nerves, Professor Maxon sailed with his daughter for a long ocean voyage, which he hoped would aid him in rapid recuperation, and permit him to forget the nightmare memory of those three horrible days and nights in his workshop.

He believed that he had reached an unalterable decision never again to meddle with the mighty, awe inspiring secrets of creation; but with returning health and balance he found himself viewing his recent triumph with feelings of renewed hope and anticipation.

The morbid fears superinduced by the shock following the sudden demise of the first creature of his experiments had given place to a growing desire to further prosecute his labors until enduring success had crowned his efforts with an achievement which he might exhibit with pride to the scientific world.

His recent disastrous success had convinced him that neither Ithaca nor any other abode of civilization was a safe place to continue his experiments, but it was not until their cruising had brought them among the multitudinous islands of the East Indies that the plan occurred to him that he finally adopted--a plan the outcome of which could he then have foreseen would have sent him scurrying to the safety of his own country with the daughter who was to bear the full brunt of the horrors it entailed.

They were steaming up the China Sea when the idea first suggested itself, and as he sat idly during the long, hot days the thought grew upon him, expanding into a thousand wonderful possibilities, until it became crystalized into what was a little short of an obsession.

The result was that at Manila, much to Virginia's surprise, he announced the abandonment of the balance of their purposed voyage, taking immediate return passage to Singapore. His daughter did not question him as to the cause of this change in plans, for since those three days that her father had kept himself locked in his workroom at home the girl had noticed a subtle change in her parent--a marked disinclination to share with her his every confidence as had been his custom since the death of her mother.

While it grieved her immeasurably she was both too proud and too hurt to sue for a reestablishment of the old relations. On all other topics than his scientific work their interests were as mutual as formerly, but by what seemed a manner of tacit agreement this subject was taboo. And so it was that they came to Singapore without the girl having the slightest conception of her father's plans.

Here they spent nearly a month, during which time Professor Maxon was daily engaged in interviewing officials, English residents and a motley horde of Malays and Chinamen.

Virginia met socially several of the men with whom her father was engaged but it was only at the last moment that one of them let drop a hint of the purpose of the month's activity. When Virginia was present the conversation seemed always deftly guided from the subject of her father's immediate future, and she was not long in discerning that it was in no sense through accident that this was true. Thereafter her wounded pride made easy the task of those who seemed combined to keep her in ignorance.

It was a Dr. von Horn, who had been oftenest with her father, who gave her the first intimation of what was forthcoming. Afterward, in recollecting the conversation, it seemed to Virginia that the young man had been directed to break the news to her, that her father might be spared the ordeal. It was evident then that he expected opposition, but the girl was too loyal to let von Horn know if she felt other than in harmony with the proposal, and too proud to evince by surprise the fact that she was not wholly conversant with its every detail.

"You are glad to be leaving Singapore so soon?" he had asked, although he knew that she had not been advised that an early departure was planned.

"I am rather looking forward to it," replied Virginia.

"And to a protracted residence on one of the Pamarung Islands?" continued von Horn.

"Why not?" was her rather non-committal reply, though she had not the remotest idea of their location.

Von Horn admired her nerve though he rather wished that she would ask some questions--it was difficult making progress in this way. How could he explain the plans when she evinced not the slightest sign that she was not already entirely conversant with them?

"We doubt if the work will be completed under two or three years," answered the doctor. "That will be a long time in which to be isolated upon a savage little speck of land off the larger but no less savage Borneo. Do you think that your bravery is equal to the demands that will be made upon it?"

Virginia laughed, nor was there the slightest tremor in its note.

"I am equal to whatever fate my father is equal to," she said, "nor do I think that a life upon one of these beautiful little islands would be much of a hardship-- certainly not if it will help to promote the success of his scientific experiments."

She used the last words on a chance that she might have hit upon the true reason for the contemplated isolation from civilization. They had served their purpose too in deceiving von Horn who was now half convinced that Professor Maxon must have divulged more of their plans to his daughter than he had led the medical man to believe. Perceiving her advantage from the expression on the young man's face, Virginia followed it up in an endeavor to elicit the details.

The result of her effort was the knowledge that on the second day they were to sail for the Pamarung Islands upon a small schooner which her father had purchased, with a crew of Malays and lascars, and von Horn, who had served in the American navy, in command. The precise point of destination was still undecided--the plan being to search out a suitable location upon one of the many little islets which dot the western shore of the Macassar Strait.

Of the many men Virginia had met during the month at Singapore von Horn had been by far the most interesting and companionable. Such time as he could find from the many duties which had devolved upon him in the matter of obtaining and outfitting the schooner, and signing her two mates and crew of fifteen, had been spent with his employer's daughter.

The girl was rather glad that he was to be a member of their little company, for she had found him a much travelled man and an interesting talker with none of the, to her, disgusting artificialities of the professional ladies' man. He talked to her as he might have talked to a man, of the things that interest intelligent people regardless of sex.

There was never any suggestion of familiarity in his manner; nor in his choice of topics did he ever ignore the fact that she was a young girl. She had felt entirely at ease in his society from the first evening that she had met him, and their acquaintance had grown to a very sensible friendship by the time of the departure of the Ithaca--the rechristened schooner which was to carry them away to an unguessed fate.

The voyage from Singapore to the Islands was without incident. Virginia took a keen delight in watching the Malays and lascars at their work, telling von Horn that she had to draw upon her imagination but little to picture herself a captive upon a pirate ship--the half naked men, the gaudy headdress, the earrings, and the fierce countenances of many of the crew furnishing only too realistically the necessary savage setting.

A week spent among the Pamarung Islands disclosed no suitable site for the professor's camp, nor was it until they had cruised up the coast several miles north of the equator and Cape Santang that they found a tiny island a few miles off the coast opposite the mouth of a small river--an island which fulfilled in every detail their requirements.

It was uninhabited, fertile and possessed a clear, sweet brook which had its source in a cold spring in the higher land at the island's center. Here it was that the Ithaca came to anchor in a little harbor, while her crew under von Horn, and the Malay first mate, Bududreen, accompanied Professor Maxon in search of a suitable location for a permanent camp.

The cook, a harmless old Chinaman, and Virginia were left in sole possession of the Ithaca.

Two hours after the departure of the men into the jungle Virginia heard the fall of axes on timber and knew that the site of her future home had been chosen and the work of clearing begun. She sat musing on the strange freak which had prompted her father to bury them in this savage corner of the globe; and as she pondered there came a wistful expression to her eyes, and an unwonted sadness drooped the corners of her mouth.

Of a sudden she realized how wide had become the gulf between them now. So imperceptibly had it grown since those three horrid days in Ithaca just prior to their departure for what was to have been but a few months' cruise that she had not until now comprehended that the old relations of open, good-fellowship had gone, possibly forever.

Had she needed proof of the truth of her sad discovery it had been enough to point to the single fact that her father had brought her here to this little island without making the slightest attempt to explain the nature of his expedition. She had gleaned enough from von Horn to understand that some important scientific experiments were to be undertaken; but what their nature she could not imagine, for she had not the slightest conception of the success that had crowned her father's last experiment at Ithaca, although she had for years known of his keen interest in the subject.

The girl became aware also of other subtle changes in her father. He had long since ceased to be the jovial, carefree companion who had shared with her her every girlish joy and sorrow and in whom she had confided both the trivial and momentous secrets of her childhood. He had become not exactly morose, but rather moody and absorbed, so that she had of late never found an opportunity for the cozy chats that had formerly meant so much to them both. There had been too, recently, a strange lack of consideration for herself that had wounded her more than she had imagined. Today there had been a

glaring example of it in his having left her alone upon the boat without a single European companion--something that he would never have thought of doing a few months before.

As she sat speculating on the strange change which had come over her father her eyes had wandered aimlessly along the harbor's entrance; the low reef that protected it from the sea, and the point of land to the south, that projected far out into the strait like a gigantic index finger pointing toward the mainland, the foliage covered heights of which were just visible above the western horizon.

Presently her attention was arrested by a tossing speck far out upon the rolling bosom of the strait. For some time the girl watched the object until at length it resolved itself into a boat moving head on toward the island. Later she saw that it was long and low, propelled by a single sail and many oars, and that it carried quite a company.

Thinking it but a native trading boat, so many of which ply the southern seas, Virginia viewed its approach with but idle curiosity. When it had come to within half a mile of the anchorage of the Ithaca, and was about to enter the mouth of the harbor Sing Lee's eyes chanced to fall upon it. On the instant the old Chinaman was electrified into sudden and astounding action.

"Klick! Klick!" he cried, running toward Virginia. "Go b'low, klick."

"Why should I go below, Sing?" queried the girl, amazed by the demeanor of the cook.

"Klick! Klick!" he urged grasping her by the arm--half leading, half dragging her toward the companion-way. "Plilates! Mlalay plilates--Dyak plilates."

"Pirates!" gasped Virginia. "Oh Sing, what can we do?"

"You go b'low. Mebbyso Sing flighten 'em. Shoot cannon. Bling help. Maxon come klick. Bling men. Chase'm 'way," explained the Chinaman. "But plilates see 'em pletty white girl," he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head dubiously, "then old Sing no can flighten 'em 'way."

The girl shuddered, and crouching close behind Sing hurried below. A moment later she heard the boom of the old brass six pounder which for many years had graced the Ithaca's stern. In the bow Professor Maxon had mounted a modern machine gun, but this was quite beyond Sing's simple gunnery. The Chinaman had not taken the time to sight the ancient weapon carefully, but a gleeful smile lit his wrinkled, yellow face as he saw the splash of the ball where it struck the water almost at the side of the prahu.

Sing realized that the boat might contain friendly natives, but he had cruised these waters too many years to take chances. Better kill a hundred friends, he thought, than be captured by a single pirate.

At the shot the prahu slowed up, and a volley of musketry from her crew satisfied Sing that he had made no mistake in classifying her. Her fire fell short as did the ball from the small cannon mounted in her bow.

Virginia was watching the prahu from one of the cabin ports. She saw the momentary hesitation and confusion which followed Sing's first shot, and then to her dismay she saw the rowers bend to their oars again and the prahu move swiftly in the direction of the Ithaca.

It was apparent that the pirates had perceived the almost defenseless condition of the schooner. In a few minutes they would be swarming the deck, for poor old Sing would be entirely helpless to repel them. If Dr. von Horn were only there, thought the distracted girl. With the machine gun alone he might keep them off.

At the thought of the machine gun a sudden resolve gripped her. Why not man it herself? Von Horn had explained its mechanism to her in detail, and on one occasion had allowed her to operate it on the voyage from Singapore. With the thought came action. Running to the magazine she snatched up a feed-belt, and in another moment was on deck beside the astonished Sing.

The pirates were skimming rapidly across the smooth waters of the harbor, answering Sing's harmless shots with yells of derision and wild, savage war cries. There were, perhaps, fifty Dyaks and Malays--fierce, barbaric men; mostly naked to the waist, or with war-coats of brilliant colors. The savage headdress of the Dyaks, the long, narrow, decorated shields, the flashing blades of parang and kris sent a shudder through the girl, so close they seemed beneath the schooner's side.

"What do? What do?" cried Sing in consternation. "Go b'low. Klick!" But before he had finished his exhortation Virginia was racing toward the bow where the machine gun was mounted. Tearing the cover from it she swung the muzzle toward the pirate prahu, which by now was nearly within range above the vessel's side-- a moment more and she would be too close to use the weapon upon the pirates.

Virginia was quick to perceive the necessity for haste, while the pirates at the same instant realized the menace of the new danger which confronted them. A score of muskets belched forth their missiles at the fearless girl behind the scant shield of the machine gun. Lead pellets rained heavily upon her protection, or whizzed threateningly about her head-- and then she got the gun into action.

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