

CHAPTER VI - IN THE TOILS OF HORROR

What the creature had told her gave Tara of Helium food for thought. She had been taught that every created thing fulfilled some useful purpose, and she tried conscientiously to discover just what was the rightful place of the kaldane in the universal scheme of things. She knew that it must have its place but what that place was it was beyond her to conceive. She had to give it up. They recalled to her mind a little group of people in Helium who had forsworn the pleasures of life in the pursuit of knowledge. They were rather patronizing in their relations with those whom they thought not so intellectual. They considered themselves quite superior. She smiled at recollection of a remark her father had once made concerning them, to the effect that if one of them ever dropped his egotism and broke it it would take a week to fumigate Helium. Her father liked normal people--people who knew too little and people who knew too much were equally a bore. Tara of Helium was like her father in this respect and like him, too, she was both sane and normal.

Outside of her personal danger there was much in this strange world that interested her. The rykors aroused her keenest pity, and vast conjecture. How and from what form had they evolved? She asked Ghek.

"Sing to me again and I will tell you," he said. "If Luud would let me have you, you should never die. I should keep you always to sing to me."

The girl marvelled at the effect her voice had upon the creature. Somewhere in that enormous brain there was a chord that was touched by melody. It was the sole link between herself and the brain when detached from the rykor. When it dominated the rykor it might have other human instincts; but these she dreaded even to think of. After she had sung she waited for Ghek to speak. For a long time he was silent, just looking at her through those awful eyes.

"I wonder," he said presently, "if it might not be pleasant to be of your race. Do you all sing?"

"Nearly all, a little," she said; "but we do many other interesting and enjoyable things. We dance and play and work and love and sometimes we fight, for we are a race of warriors."

"Love!" said the kaldane. "I think I know what you mean; but we, fortunately, are above sentiment--when we are detached. But when we dominate the rykor--ah, that is different, and when I hear you sing and look at your beautiful body I know what you mean by love. I could love you."

The girl shrank from him. "You promised to tell me the origin of the rykor," she reminded him.

"Ages ago," he commenced, "our bodies were larger and our heads smaller. Our legs were very weak and we could not travel fast or far. There was a stupid creature that went upon four legs. It lived in a hole in the ground, to which it brought its food, so we ran our burrows into this hole and ate the food it brought; but it did not bring enough for all--for itself and all the kaldanes that lived upon it, so we had also to go abroad and get food. This was hard work for our weak legs. Then it was that we commenced to ride upon the backs of these primitive rykors. It took many ages, undoubtedly, but at last came the time when the kaldane had found means to guide the rykor, until presently the latter depended entirely upon the superior brain of his master to guide him to food. The brain of the rykor grew smaller as time went on. His ears went and his eyes, for he no longer had use for them--the kaldane saw and heard for him. By similar steps the rykor came to go upon its hind feet that the kaldane might be able to see farther. As the brain shrank, so did the head. The mouth was the only feature of the head that was used and so the mouth alone remains. Members of the red race fell into the hands of our ancestors from time to time. They saw the beauties and the advantages of the form that nature had given the red race over that which the rykor was developing into. By intelligent crossing the present rykor was achieved. He is really solely the product of the super-intelligence of the kaldane--he is our body, to do with as we see fit, just as you do what you see fit with your body, only we have the advantage of possessing an unlimited supply of bodies. Do you not wish that you were a kaldane?"

For how long they kept her in the subterranean chamber Tara of Helium did not know. It seemed a very long time. She ate and slept and watched the interminable lines of creatures that passed the entrance to her prison. There was a laden line passing from above carrying food, food, food. In the other line they returned empty handed. When she saw them she knew that it was daylight above. When they did not pass she knew it was night, and that the banths were about devouring the rykors that had been abandoned in the fields the previous day. She commenced to grow pale and thin. She did not like the food they gave her--it was not suited to her kind--nor would she have eaten overmuch palatable food, for the fear of becoming fat. The idea of plumpness had a new significance here--a horrible significance.

Ghek noted that she was growing thin and white. He spoke to her about it and she told him that she could not thrive thus beneath the ground--that she must have fresh air and sunshine, or she would wither and die. Evidently he carried her words to Luud, since it was not long after that he told her that the king had

ordered that she be confined in the tower and to the tower she was taken. She had hoped against hope that this very thing might result from her conversation with Ghek. Even to see the sun again was something, but now there sprang to her breast a hope that she had not dared to nurse before, while she lay in the terrible labyrinth from which she knew she could never have found her way to the outer world; but now there was some slight reason to hope. At least she could see the hills and if she could see them might there not come also the opportunity to reach them? If she could have but ten minutes--just ten little minutes! The flier was still there--she knew that it must be. Just ten minutes and she would be free--free forever from this frightful place; but the days wore on and she was never alone, not even for half of ten minutes. Many times she planned her escape. Had it not been for the banths it had been easy of accomplishment by night. Ghek always detached his body then and sank into what seemed a semi-comatose condition. It could not be said that he slept, or at least it did not appear like sleep, since his lidless eyes were unchanged; but he lay quietly in a corner. Tara of Helium enacted a thousand times in her mind the scene of her escape. She would rush to the side of the rykor and seize the sword that hung in its harness. Before Ghek knew what she purposed, she would have this and then before he could give an alarm she would drive the blade through his hideous head. It would take but a moment to reach the enclosure. The rykors could not stop her, for they had no brains to tell them that she was escaping. She had watched from her window the opening and closing of the gate that led from the enclosure out into the fields and she knew how the great latch operated. She would pass through and make a quick dash for the hill. It was so near that they could not overtake her. It was so easy! Or it would have been but for the banths! The banths at night and the workers in the fields by day.

Confined to the tower and without proper exercise or food, the girl failed to show the improvement that her captors desired. Ghek questioned her in an effort to learn why it was that she did not grow round and plump; that she did not even look as well as when they had captured her. His concern was prompted by repeated inquiries on the part of Luud and finally resulted in suggesting to Tara of Helium a plan whereby she might find a new opportunity of escape.

"I am accustomed to walking in the fresh air and the sunlight," she told Ghek. "I cannot become as I was before if I am to be always shut away in this one chamber, breathing poor air and getting no proper exercise. Permit me to go out in the fields every day and walk about while the sun is shining. Then, I am sure, I shall become nice and fat."

"You would run away," he said.

"But how could I if you were always with me?" she asked. "And even if I wished to run away where could I go? I do not know even the direction of Helium. It must be very far. The very first night the banths would get me, would they not?"

"They would," said Ghek. "I will ask Luud about it."

The following day he told her that Luud had said that she was to be taken into the fields. He would try that for a time and see if she improved.

"If you do not grow fatter he will send for you anyway," said Ghek; "but he will not use you for food."

Tara of Helium shuddered.

That day and for many days thereafter she was taken from the tower, through the enclosure and out into the fields. Always was she alert for an opportunity to escape; but Ghek was always close by her side. It was not so much his presence that deterred her from making the attempt as the number of workers that were always between her and the hills where the flier lay. She could easily have eluded Ghek, but there were too many of the others. And then, one day, Ghek told her as he accompanied her into the open that this would be the last time.

"Tonight you go to Luud," he said. "I am sorry as I shall not hear you sing again."

"Tonight!" She scarce breathed the word, yet it was vibrant with horror.

She glanced quickly toward the hills. They were so close! Yet between were the inevitable workers--perhaps a score of them.

"Let us walk over there?" she said, indicating them. "I should like to see what they are doing."

"It is too far," said Ghek. "I hate the sun. It is much pleasanter here where I can stand beneath the shade of this tree."

"All right," she agreed; "then you stay here and I will walk over. It will take me but a minute."

"No," he answered. "I will go with you. You want to escape; but you are not going to."

"I cannot escape," she said.

"I know it," agreed Ghek; "but you might try. I do not wish you to try. Possibly it will be better if we return to the tower at once. It would go hard with me should you escape."

Tara of Helium saw her last chance fading into oblivion. There would never be another after today. She cast about for some pretext to lure him even a little nearer to the hills.

"It is very little that I ask," she said. "Tonight you will want me to sing to you. It will be the last time, if you do not let me go and see what those kaldanes are doing I shall never sing to you again."

Ghek hesitated. "I will hold you by the arm all the time, then," he said.

"Why, of course, if you wish," she assented. "Come!"

The two moved toward the workers and the hills. The little party was digging tubers from the ground. She had noted this and that nearly always they were stooped low over their work, the hideous eyes bent upon the upturned soil. She led Ghek quite close to them, pretending that she wished to see exactly how they did the work, and all the time he held her tightly by her left wrist.

"It is very interesting," she said, with a sigh, and then, suddenly; "Look, Ghek!" and pointed quickly back in the direction of the tower. The kaldane, still holding her turned half away from her to look in the direction she had indicated and simultaneously, with the quickness of a banth, she struck him with her right fist, backed by every ounce of strength she possessed--struck the back of the pulpy head just above the collar. The blow was sufficient to accomplish her design, dislodging the kaldane from its rykor and tumbling it to the ground. Instantly the grasp upon her wrist relaxed as the body, no longer controlled by the brain of Ghek, stumbled aimlessly about for an instant before it sank to its knees and then rolled over on its back; but Tara of Helium waited not to note the full results of her act. The instant the fingers loosened upon her wrist she broke away and dashed toward the hills. Simultaneously a warning whistle broke from Ghek's lips and in instant response the workers leaped to their feet, one almost in the girl's path. She dodged the outstretched arms and was away again toward the hills and freedom, when her foot caught in one of the hoe-like instruments with which the soil had been upturned and which had been left, half imbedded in the ground. For an instant she ran on, stumbling, in a mad effort to regain her equilibrium, but the upturned furrows caught her feet--again she stumbled and this time went down, and as she scrambled to rise again a heavy body fell upon her and seized her arms. A moment later she was surrounded and dragged to her feet and as she looked around she saw Ghek crawling to his prostrate rykor. A moment later he advanced to her side.

The hideous face, incapable of registering emotion, gave no clue to what was passing in the enormous brain. Was he nursing thoughts of anger, of hate, of

revenge? Tara of Helium could not guess, nor did she care. The worst had happened. She had tried to escape and she had failed. There would never be another opportunity.

"Come!" said Ghek. "We will return to the tower." The deadly monotone of his voice was unbroken. It was worse than anger, for it revealed nothing of his intentions. It but increased her horror of these great brains that were beyond the possibility of human emotions.

And so she was dragged back to her prison in the tower and Ghek took up his vigil again, squatting by the doorway, but now he carried a naked sword in his hand and did not quit his rykor, only to change to another that he had brought to him when the first gave indications of weariness. The girl sat looking at him. He had not been unkind to her, but she felt no sense of gratitude, nor, on the other hand, any sense of hatred. The brains, incapable themselves of any of the finer sentiments, awoke none in her. She could not feel gratitude, or affection, or hatred of them. There was only the same unceasing sense of horror in their presence. She had heard great scientists discuss the future of the red race and she recalled that some had maintained that eventually the brain would entirely dominate the man. There would be no more instinctive acts or emotions, nothing would be done on impulse; but on the contrary reason would direct our every act. The propounder of the theory regretted that he might never enjoy the blessings of such a state, which, he argued, would result in the ideal life for mankind.

Tara of Helium wished with all her heart that this learned scientist might be here to experience to the full the practical results of the fulfillment of his prophecy. Between the purely physical rykor and the purely mental kaldane there was little choice; but in the happy medium of normal, and imperfect man, as she knew him, lay the most desirable state of existence. It would have been a splendid object lesson, she thought, to all those idealists who seek mass perfection in any phase of human endeavor, since here they might discover the truth that absolute perfection is as little to be desired as is its antithesis.

Gloomy were the thoughts that filled the mind of Tara of Helium as she awaited the summons from Luud--the summons that could mean for her but one thing; death. She guessed why he had sent for her and she knew that she must find the means for self-destruction before the night was over; but still she clung to hope and to life. She would not give up until there was no other way. She startled Ghek once by exclaiming aloud, almost fiercely: "I still live!"

"What do you mean?" asked the kaldane.

"I mean just what I say," she replied. "I still live and while I live I may still find a way. Dead, there is no hope."

"Find a way to what?" he asked.

"To life and liberty and mine own people," she responded.

"None who enters Bantoom ever leaves," he droned.

She did not reply and after a time he spoke again. "Sing to me," he said.

It was while she was singing that four warriors came to take her to Luud. They told Ghek that he was to remain where he was.

"Why?" asked Ghek.

"You have displeased Luud," replied one of the warriors.

"How?" demanded Ghek.

"You have demonstrated a lack of uncontaminated reasoning power. You have permitted sentiment to influence you, thus demonstrating that you are a defective. You know the fate of defectives."

"I know the fate of defectives, but I am no defective," insisted Ghek.

"You permitted the strange noises which issue from her throat to please and soothe you, knowing well that their origin and purpose had nothing whatever to do with logic or the powers of reason. This in itself constitutes an unimpeachable indictment of weakness. Then, influenced doubtless by an illogical feeling of sentiment, you permitted her to walk abroad in the fields to a place where she was able to make an almost successful attempt to escape. Your own reasoning power, were it not defective, would convince you that you are unfit. The natural, and reasonable, consequence is destruction. Therefore you will be destroyed in such a way that the example will be beneficial to all other kaldanes of the swarm of Luud. In the meantime you will remain where you are."

"You are right," said Ghek. "I will remain here until Luud sees fit to destroy me in the most reasonable manner."

Tara of Helium shot a look of amazement at him as they led her from the chamber. Over her shoulder she called back to him: "Remember, Ghek, you still live!" Then they led her along the interminable tunnels to where Luud awaited her.

When she was conducted into his presence he was squatting in a corner of the chamber upon his six spidery legs. Near the opposite wall lay his rykor, its beautiful form trapped in gorgeous harness--a dead thing without a guiding kaldane. Luud dismissed the warriors who had accompanied the prisoner. Then he sat with his terrible eyes fixed upon her and without speaking for some time. Tara of Helium could but wait. What was to come she could only guess. When it came would be sufficiently the time to meet it. There was no necessity for anticipating the end. Presently Luud spoke.

"You think to escape," he said, in the deadly, expressionless monotone of his kind--the only possible result of orally expressing reason uninfluenced by sentiment. "You will not escape. You are merely the embodiment of two imperfect things--an imperfect brain and an imperfect body. The two cannot exist together in perfection. There you see a perfect body." He pointed toward the rykor. "It has no brain. Here," and he raised one of his chelae to his head, "is the perfect brain. It needs no body to function perfectly and properly as a brain. You would pit your feeble intellect against mine! Even now you are planning to slay me. If you are thwarted in that you expect to slay yourself. You will learn the power of mind over matter. I am the mind. You are the matter. What brain you have is too weak and ill-developed to deserve the name of brain. You have permitted it to be weakened by impulsive acts dictated by sentiment. It has no value. It has practically no control over your existence. You will not kill me. You will not kill yourself. When I am through with you you shall be killed if it seems the logical thing to do. You have no conception of the possibilities for power which lie in a perfectly developed brain. Look at that rykor. He has no brain. He can move but slightly of his own volition. An inherent mechanical instinct that we have permitted to remain in him allows him to carry food to his mouth; but he could not find food for himself. We have to place it within his reach and always in the same place. Should we put food at his feet and leave him alone he would starve to death. But now watch what a real brain may accomplish."

He turned his eyes upon the rykor and squatted there glaring at the insensate thing. Presently, to the girl's horror, the headless body moved. It rose slowly to its feet and crossed the room to Luud; it stooped and took the hideous head in its hands; it raised the head and set it on its shoulders.

"What chance have you against such power?" asked Luud. "As I did with the rykor so can I do with you."

Tara of Helium made no reply. Evidently no vocal reply was necessary.

"You doubt my ability!" stated Luud, which was precisely the fact, though the girl had only thought it--she had not said it.

Luud crossed the room and lay down. Then he detached himself from the body and crawled across the floor until he stood directly in front of the circular opening through which she had seen him emerge the day that she had first been brought to his presence. He stopped there and fastened his terrible eyes upon her. He did not speak, but his eyes seemed to be boring straight to the center of her brain. She felt an almost irresistible force urging her toward the kaldane. She fought to resist it; she tried to turn away her eyes, but she could not. They were held as in horrid fascination upon the glittering, lidless orbs of the great brain that faced her. Slowly, every step a painful struggle of resistance, she moved toward the horrific monster. She tried to cry aloud in an effort to awaken her numbing faculties, but no sound passed her lips. If those eyes would but turn away, just for an instant, she felt that she might regain the power to control her steps; but the eyes never left hers. They seemed but to burn deeper and deeper, gathering up every vestige of control of her entire nervous system.

As she approached the thing it backed slowly away upon its spider legs. She noticed that its chelae waved slowly to and fro before it as it backed, backed, backed, through the round aperture in the wall. Must she follow it there, too? What new and nameless horror lay concealed in that hidden chamber? No! she would not do it. Yet before she reached the wall she found herself down and crawling upon her hands and knees straight toward the hole from which the two eyes still clung to hers. At the very threshold of the opening she made a last, heroic stand, battling against the force that drew her on; but in the end she succumbed. With a gasp that ended in a sob Tara of Helium passed through the aperture into the chamber beyond.

The opening was but barely large enough to admit her. Upon the opposite side she found herself in a small chamber. Before her squatted Luud. Against the opposite wall lay a large and beautiful male rykor. He was without harness or other trappings.

"You see now," said Luud, "the futility of revolt."

The words seemed to release her momentarily from the spell. Quickly she turned away her eyes.

"Look at me!" commanded Luud.

Tara of Helium kept her eyes averted. She felt a new strength, or at least a diminution of the creature's power over her. Had she stumbled upon the secret of its uncanny domination over her will? She dared not hope. With eyes averted she turned toward the aperture through which those baleful eyes had drawn her. Again Luud commanded her to stop, but the voice alone lacked all authority to

influence her. It was not like the eyes. She heard the creature whistle and knew that it was summoning assistance, but because she did not dare look toward it she did not see it turn and concentrate its gaze upon the great, headless body lying by the further wall.

The girl was still slightly under the spell of the creature's influence--she had not regained full and independent domination of her powers. She moved as one in the throes of some hideous nightmare--slowly, painfully, as though each limb was hampered by a great weight, or as she were dragging her body through a viscous fluid. The aperture was close, ah, so close, yet, struggle as she would, she seemed to be making no appreciable progress toward it.

Behind her, urged on by the malevolent power of the great brain, the headless body crawled upon all-fours toward her. At last she had reached the aperture. Something seemed to tell her that once beyond it the domination of the kaldane would be broken. She was almost through into the adjoining chamber when she felt a heavy hand close upon her ankle. The rykor had reached forth and seized her, and though she struggled the thing dragged her back into the room with Luud. It held her tight and drew her close, and then, to her horror, it commenced to caress her.

"You see now," she heard Luud's dull voice, "the futility of revolt--and its punishment."

Tara of Helium fought to defend herself, but pitifully weak were her muscles against this brainless incarnation of brute power. Yet she fought, fought on in the face of hopeless odds for the honor of the proud name she bore--fought alone, she whom the fighting men of a mighty empire, the flower of Martian chivalry, would gladly have lain down their lives to save.