

CHAPTER VIII - CLOSE WORK

Ghek, in his happier days third foreman of the fields of Luud, sat nursing his anger and his humiliation. Recently something had awakened within him the existence of which he had never before even dreamed. Had the influence of the strange captive woman ought to do with this unrest and dissatisfaction? He did not know. He missed the soothing influence of the noise she called singing. Could it be that there were other things more desirable than cold logic and undefiled brain power? Was well balanced imperfection more to be sought after than, than the high development of a single characteristic? He thought of the great, ultimate brain toward which all kaldanes were striving. It would be deaf, and dumb, and blind. A thousand beautiful strangers might sing and dance about it, but it could derive no pleasure from the singing or the dancing since it would possess no perceptive faculties. Already had the kaldanes shut themselves off from most of the gratifications of the senses. Ghek wondered if much was to be gained by denying themselves still further, and with the thought came a question as to the whole fabric of their theory. After all perhaps the girl was right; what purpose could a great brain serve sealed in the bowels of the earth?

And he, Ghek, was to die for this theory. Luud had decreed it. The injustice of it overwhelmed him with rage. But he was helpless. There was no escape. Beyond the enclosure the banths awaited him; within, his own kind, equally as merciless and ferocious. Among them there was no such thing as love, or loyalty, or friendship--they were just brains. He might kill Luud; but what would that profit him? Another king would be loosed from his sealed chamber and Ghek would be killed. He did not know it but he would not even have the poor satisfaction of satisfied revenge, since he was not capable of feeling so abstruse a sentiment.

Ghek, mounted upon his rykor, paced the floor of the tower chamber in which he had been ordered to remain. Ordinarily he would have accepted the sentence of Luud with perfect equanimity, since it was but the logical result of reason; but now it seemed different. The stranger woman had bewitched him. Life appeared a pleasant thing--there were great possibilities in it. The dream of the ultimate brain had receded into a tenuous haze far in the background of his thoughts.

At that moment there appeared in the doorway of the chamber a red warrior with naked sword. He was a male counterpart of the prisoner whose sweet voice had undermined the cold, calculating reason of the kaldane.

"Silence!" admonished the newcomer, his straight brows gathered in an ominous frown and the point of his longsword playing menacingly before the eyes of the

kaldane. "I seek the woman, Tara of Helium. Where is she? If you value your life speak quickly and speak the truth."

If he valued his life! It was a truth that Ghek had but just learned. He thought quickly. After all, a great brain is not without its uses. Perhaps here lay escape from the sentence of Luud.

"You are of her kind?" he asked. "You come to rescue her?"

"Yes."

"Listen, then. I have befriended her, and because of this I am to die. If I help you to liberate her, will you take me with you?"

Gahan of Gathol eyed the weird creature from crown to foot--the perfect body, the grotesque head, the expressionless face. Among such as these had the beautiful daughter of Helium been held captive for days and weeks.

"If she lives and is unharmed," he said, "I will take you with us."

"When they took her from me she was alive and unharmed," replied Ghek. "I cannot say what has befallen her since. Luud sent for her."

"Who is Luud? Where is he? Lead me to him." Gahan spoke quickly in tones vibrant with authority.

"Come, then," said Ghek, leading the way from the apartment and down a stairway toward the underground burrows of the kaldanes. "Luud is my king. I will take you to his chambers."

"Hasten!" urged Gahan.

"Sheathe your sword," warned Ghek, "so that should we pass others of my kind I may say to them that you are a new prisoner with some likelihood of winning their belief."

Gahan did as he was bid, but warning the kaldane that his hand was ever ready at his dagger's hilt.

"You need have no fear of treachery," said Ghek "My only hope of life lies in you."

"And if you fail me," Gahan admonished him, "I can promise you as sure a death as even your king might guarantee you."

Ghek made no reply, but moved rapidly through the winding subterranean corridors until Gahan began to realize how truly was he in the hands of this strange monster. If the fellow should prove false it would profit Gahan nothing to

slay him, since without his guidance the red man might never hope to retrace his way to the tower and freedom.

Twice they met and were accosted by other kaldanes; but in both instances Ghek's simple statement that he was taking a new prisoner to Luud appeared to allay all suspicion, and then at last they came to the ante-chamber of the king.

"Here, now, red man, thou must fight, if ever," whispered Ghek. "Enter there!" and he pointed to a doorway before them.

"And you?" asked Gahan, still fearful of treachery.

"My rykor is powerful," replied the kaldane. "I shall accompany you and fight at your side. As well die thus as in torture later at the will of Luud. Come!"

But Gahan had already crossed the room and entered the chamber beyond. Upon the opposite side of the room was a circular opening guarded by two warriors. Beyond this opening he could see two figures struggling upon the floor, and the fleeting glimpse he had of one of the faces suddenly endowed him with the strength of ten warriors and the ferocity of a wounded banth. It was Tara of Helium, fighting for her honor or her life.

The warriors, startled by the unexpected appearance of a red man, stood for a moment in dumb amazement, and in that moment Gahan of Gathol was upon them, and one was down, a sword-thrust through its heart.

"Strike at the heads," whispered the voice of Ghek in Gahan's ear. The latter saw the head of the fallen warrior crawl quickly within the aperture leading to the chamber where he had seen Tara of Helium in the clutches of a headless body. Then the sword of Ghek struck the kaldane of the remaining warrior from its rykor and Gahan ran his sword through the repulsive head.

Instantly the red warrior leaped for the aperture, while close behind him came Ghek.

"Look not upon the eyes of Luud," warned the kaldane, "or you are lost."

Within the chamber Gahan saw Tara of Helium in the clutches of a mighty body, while close to the wall upon the opposite side of the apartment crouched the hideous, spider-like Luud. Instantly the king realized the menace to himself and sought to fasten his eyes upon the eyes of Gahan, and in doing so he was forced to relax his concentration upon the rykor in whose embraces Tara struggled, so that almost immediately the girl found herself able to tear away from the awful, headless thing.

As she rose quickly to her feet she saw for the first time the cause of the interruption of Luud's plans. A red warrior! Her heart leaped in rejoicing and thanksgiving. What miracle of fate had sent him to her? She did not recognize him, though, this travel-worn warrior in the plain harness which showed no single jewel. How could she have guessed him the same as the scintillant creature of platinum and diamonds that she had seen for a brief hour under such different circumstances at the court of her august sire?

Luud saw Ghek following the strange warrior into the chamber. "Strike him down, Ghek!" commanded the king. "Strike down the stranger and your life shall be yours."

Gahan glanced at the hideous face of the king.

"Seek not his eyes," screamed Tara in warning; but it was too late. Already the horrid hypnotic gaze of the king kaldane had seized upon the eyes of Gahan. The red warrior hesitated in his stride. His sword point drooped slowly toward the floor. Tara glanced toward Ghek. She saw the creature glaring with his expressionless eyes upon the broad back of the stranger. She saw the hand of the creature's rykor creeping stealthily toward the hilt of its dagger.

And then Tara of Helium raised her eyes aloft and poured forth the notes of Mars' most beautiful melody, The Song of Love.

Ghek drew his dagger from its sheath. His eyes turned toward the singing girl. Luud's glance wavered from the eyes of the man to the face of Tara, and the instant that the latter's song distracted his attention from his victim, Gahan of Gathol shook himself and as with a supreme effort of will forced his eyes to the wall above Luud's hideous head. Ghek raised his dagger above his right shoulder, took a single quick step forward, and struck. The girl's song ended in a stifled scream as she leaped forward with the evident intention of frustrating the kaldane's purpose; but she was too late, and well it was, for an instant later she realized the purpose of Ghek's act as she saw the dagger fly from his hand, pass Gahan's shoulder, and sink full to the guard in the soft face of Luud.

"Come!" cried the assassin, "we have no time to lose," and started for the aperture through which they had entered the chamber; but in his stride he paused as his glance was arrested by the form of the mighty rykor lying prone upon the floor--a king's rykor; the most beautiful, the most powerful, that the breeders of Bantoom could produce. Ghek realized that in his escape he could take with him but a single rykor, and there was none in Bantoom that could give him better service than this giant lying here. Quickly he transferred himself to the shoulders of the

great, inert hulk. Instantly the latter was transformed to a sentient creature, filled with pulsing life and alert energy.

"Now," said the kaldane, "we are ready. Let whoso would revert to nothingness impede me." Even as he spoke he stooped and crawled into the chamber beyond, while Gahan, taking Tara by the arm, motioned her to follow. The girl looked him full in the eyes for the first time. "The Gods of my people have been kind," she said; "you came just in time. To the thanks of Tara of Helium shall be added those of The Warlord of Barsoom and his people. Thy reward shall surpass thy greatest desires."

Gahan of Gathol saw that she did not recognize him, and quickly he checked the warm greeting that had been upon his lips.

"Be thou Tara of Helium or another," he replied, "is immaterial, to serve thus a red woman of Barsoom is in itself sufficient reward."

As they spoke the girl was making her way through the aperture after Ghek, and presently all three had quitted the apartments of Luud and were moving rapidly along the winding corridors toward the tower. Ghek repeatedly urged them to greater speed, but the red men of Barsoom were never keen for retreat, and so the two that followed him moved all too slowly for the kaldane.

"There are none to impede our progress," urged Gahan, "so why tax the strength of the Princess by needless haste?"

"I fear not so much opposition ahead, for there are none there who know the thing that has been done in Luud's chambers this night; but the kaldane of one of the warriors who stood guard before Luud's apartment escaped, and you may count it a truth that he lost no time in seeking aid. That it did not come before we left is due solely to the rapidity with which events transpired in the king's* room. Long before we reach the tower they will be upon us from behind, and that they will come in numbers far superior to ours and with great and powerful rykors I well know."

* I have used the word king in describing the rulers or chiefs of the Bantoomian swarms, since the word itself is unpronounceable in English, nor does jed or jeddak of the red Martian tongue have quite the same meaning as the Bantoomian word, which has practically the same significance as the English word queen as applied to the leader of a swarm of bees.--J. C.

Nor was Ghek's prophecy long in fulfilment. Presently the sounds of pursuit became audible in the distant clanking of accouterments and the whistling call to arms of the kaldanes.

"The tower is but a short distance now," cried Ghek. "Make haste while yet you may, and if we can barricade it until the sun rises we may yet escape."

"We shall need no barricades for we shall not linger in the tower," replied Gahan, moving more rapidly as he realized from the volume of sound behind them the great number of their pursuers.

"But we may not go further than the tower tonight," insisted Ghek. "Beyond the tower await the banths and certain death."

Gahan smiled. "Fear not the banths," he assured them. "Can we but reach the enclosure a little ahead of our pursuers we have naught to fear from any evil power within this accursed valley."

Ghek made no reply, nor did his expressionless face denote either belief or skepticism. The girl looked into the face of the man questioningly. She did not understand.

"Your flier," he said. "It is moored before the tower."

Her face lighted with pleasure and relief. "You found it!" she exclaimed. "What fortune!"

"It was fortune indeed," he replied. "Since it not only told that you were a prisoner here; but it saved me from the banths as I was crossing the valley from the hills to this tower into which I saw them take you this afternoon after your brave attempt at escape."

"How did you know it was I?" she asked, her puzzled brows scanning his face as though she sought to recall from past memories some scene in which he figured.

"Who is there but knows of the loss of the Princess Tara of Helium?" he replied. "And when I saw the device upon your flier I knew at once, though I had not known when I saw you among them in the fields a short time earlier. Too great was the distance for me to make certain whether the captive was man or woman. Had chance not divulged the hiding place of your flier I had gone my way, Tara of Helium. I shudder to think how close was the chance at that. But for the momentary shining of the sun upon the emblazoned device on the prow of your craft, I had passed on unknowing."

The girl shuddered. "The Gods sent you," she whispered reverently.

"The Gods sent me, Tara of Helium," he replied.

"But I do not recognize you," she said. "I have tried to recall you, but I have failed. Your name, what may it be?"

"It is not strange that so great a princess should not recall the face of every roving panthan of Barsoom," he replied with a smile.

"But your name?" insisted the girl.

"Call me Turan," replied the man, for it had come to him that if Tara of Helium recognized him as the man whose impetuous avowal of love had angered her that day in the gardens of The Warlord, her situation might be rendered infinitely less bearable than were she to believe him a total stranger. Then, too, as a simple panthan* he might win a greater degree of her confidence by his loyalty and faithfulness and a place in her esteem that seemed to have been closed to the resplendent Jed of Gathol.

* Soldier of Fortune; free-lance warrior.

They had reached the tower now, and as they entered it from the subterranean corridor a backward glance revealed the van of their pursuers--hideous kaldanes mounted upon swift and powerful rykors. As rapidly as might be the three ascended the stairways leading to the ground level, but after them, even more rapidly, came the minions of Luud. Ghek led the way, grasping one of Tara's hands the more easily to guide and assist her, while Gahan of Gathol followed a few paces in their rear, his bared sword ready for the assault that all realized must come upon them now before ever they reached the enclosure and the flier.

"Let Ghek drop behind to your side," said Tara, "and fight with you."

"There is but room for a single blade in these narrow corridors," replied the Gatholian. "Hasten on with Ghek and win to the deck of the flier. Have your hand upon the control, and if I come far enough ahead of these to reach the dangling cable you can rise at my word and I can clamber to the deck at my leisure; but if one of them emerges first into the enclosure you will know that I shall never come, and you will rise quickly and trust to the Gods of our ancestors to give you a fair breeze in the direction of a more hospitable people."

Tara of Helium shook her head. "We will not desert you, panthan," she said.

Gahan, ignoring her reply, spoke above her head to Ghek. "Take her to the craft moored within the enclosure," he commanded. "It is our only hope. Alone, I may win to its deck; but have I to wait upon you two at the last moment the chances are that none of us will escape. Do as I bid." His tone was haughty and arrogant--the tone of a man who has commanded other men from birth, and whose will has been law. Tara of Helium was both angered and vexed. She was not accustomed to being either commanded or ignored, but with all her royal pride she was no fool, and she knew the man was right, that he was risking his life to save hers, so

she hastened on with Ghek as she was bid, and after the first flush of anger she smiled, for the realization came to her that this fellow was but a rough untutored warrior, skilled not in the finer usages of cultured courts. His heart was right, though; a brave and loyal heart, and gladly she forgave him the offense of his tone and manner. But what a tone! Recollection of it gave her sudden pause. Panthans were rough and ready men. Often they rose to positions of high command, so it was not the note of authority in the fellow's voice that seemed remarkable; but something else--a quality that was indefinable, yet as distinct as it was familiar. She had heard it before when the voice of her great-grandsire, Tardos Mors, Jeddak of Helium, had risen in command; and in the voice of her grandfather, Mors Kajak, the jed; and in the ringing tones of her illustrious sire, John Carter, Warlord of Barsoom, when he addressed his warriors.

But now she had no time to speculate upon so trivial a thing, for behind her came the sudden clash of arms and she knew that Turan, the panthan, had crossed swords with the first of their pursuers. As she glanced back he was still visible beyond a turn in the stairway, so that she could see the quick swordplay that ensued. Daughter of a world's greatest swordsman, she knew well the finest points of the art. She saw the clumsy attack of the kaldane and the quick, sure return of the panthan. As she looked down from above upon his almost naked body, trapped only in the simplest of unadorned harness, and saw the play of the lithe muscles beneath the red-bronze skin, and witnessed the quick and delicate play of his sword point, to her sense of obligation was added a spontaneous admission of admiration that was but the natural tribute of a woman to skill and bravery and, perchance, some trifle to manly symmetry and strength.

Three times the panthan's blade changed its position--once to fend a savage cut; once to feint; and once to thrust. And as he withdrew it from the last position the kaldane rolled lifeless from its stumbling rykor and Turan sprang quickly down the steps to engage the next behind, and then Ghek had drawn Tara upward and a turn in the stairway shut the battling panthan from her view; but still she heard the ring of steel on steel, the clank of accouterments and the shrill whistling of the kaldanes. Her heart moved her to turn back to the side of her brave defender; but her judgment told her that she could serve him best by being ready at the control of the flier at the moment he reached the enclosure.