

# King of the Khyber Rifles

## A Romance of Adventure

By TALBOT MUNDY  
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THE MYSTERIOUS RANGAR DESERTS CAPT. KING AND HIS CUTTHROAT ESCORT IN A DANGEROUS PART OF KHYBER PASS AND ADVENTURES COME RAPIDLY.

**Synopsis.**—At the beginning of the world war Capt. Athelstan King of the British Indian army and of its secret service, is ordered to Delhi to meet Yasmini, a dancer, and go with her to Khinjan to quiet the outlaws there who are said by spies to be preparing for a jihad or holy war. On his way to Delhi King quietly follows a plan to assassinate him and gets evidence that Yasmini is after him. He meets Rewa Gunga, Yasmini's man, who says she has already gone north, and at her town house witnesses queer dances. Ismail, an Afridi, becomes his body servant and protector. He rescues some of Yasmini's hillmen and takes them north with him, tricking the Rangar into going ahead.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

It was not a long journey, nor a very slow one, for there was nothing to block the way except occasional men with flags, who guarded culverts and little bridges. It was low tide under the Himalayas. The flood that was draining India of her armed men had left Jamrud high and dry with a little nondescript force stranded there, as it were, under a British major and some native officers. Frowning over Jamrud were the lean "Hills," peopled by the fiercest fighting men on earth, and the clouds that hung over the Khyber's course were an accent to the savagery.

But King smiled merrily as he jumped out of the train, and Rewa Gunga, who was there to meet him, advanced with outstretched hand and a smile that would have melted snow on the distant peaks if he had only looked the other way.

"Welcome, King sahib!" he laughed, with the air of a skilled fencer who admires another, better one. "I shall know better another time and let you keep in front of me! I trust you had a comfortable journey?"

"Thanks," said King, shaking hands with him, and then turning away to unlock the carriage doors that held his prisoners in. They were buying now like wolves to be free, and they surged out, like wolves from a cage, to clamor round the Rangar, pawing him and struggling to be the first to ask him questions.

"Nay, ye mountain people; nay!" he laughed. "I, too, am from the plains! What do I know of your families or of your friends? Am I to be torn to pieces to make a meal?"

At that Ismail interfered, with the aid of an ash pick handle, chance-found beside the track. Laughing as if the whole thing was the greatest joke imaginable, Rewa Gunga fell into stride beside King and led him away in the direction of some tents.

"She is up the pass ahead of us," he announced. "She was in the deuce of a hurry, I can assure you. She wanted to wait and meet you, but matters were too jolly well urgent, and we shall have our bally work cut out to catch her, you can bet! But I have everything ready—tents and beds and stores—everything!"

King looked over his shoulder to make sure that Ismail was bringing the little leather bag along.

"So have I," he said quietly.

"I have horses," said Rewa Gunga, "and mules and—"

"How did she travel up the Khyber?" King asked him, and the Rangar spared him a curious sidewise glance.

"The 'Hills' are her escort, King sahib. She is mistress in the 'Hills.' There isn't a murdering ruffian who would not lie down and let her walk on him! She rode away alone on a thoroughbred mare and she jolly well left me the mare's double on which to follow her. Come and look."

Not far from where the tents had been pitched in a cluster a string of horses whinnied at a picket rope. King saw the two good horses ready for himself, and ten mules beside them that would have done credit to any outfit. But at the end of the line, pawing at the trampled grass, was a black mare that made his eyes open wide. Once in a hundred years or so a viceroys' cup or a Derby is won by an animal that can stand and look and move as that mare did.

"Never saw anything better," King admitted ungrudgingly.

"There is only one mare like this one," laughed the Rangar. "She has her."

"What'll you take for this one?" King asked him. "Name your price!"

"The mare is hers. You must ask her. Who knows? She is generous. There is nobody on earth more generous than she when she cares to be. See what you wear on your wrist!"

"That is a loan," said King, uncovering the bracelet. "I shall give it back to her when we meet."

"See what she says when you meet!" laughed the Rangar, taking a cigarette from his jeweled case with an air and smiling as he lighted it. "There is your tent, sahib."

With a nod of dismissal, King walked over to inspect the habdost, and finding it much more extravagant than he would have dreamed of providing for himself, he lit one of his black

cheroots, and with hands clasped behind him strolled over to the fort to interview Courtenay, the officer commanding.

It so happened that Courtenay had gone up the pass that morning with his shotgun after quail. He came back into view, followed by his little ten-man escort just as King neared the fort, and King timed his approach so as to meet him. The men of the escort were heavily burdened; he could see that from a distance.

"Hello!" he said by the fort gate, cheerily, after he had saluted and the salute had been returned.

"Oh, hello, King! Glad to see you. Heard you were coming, of course. Anything I can do?"

"Tell me anything you know," said King, offering him a cheroot, which the other accepted. As he bit off the end they stood facing each other, so that King could see the oncoming escort and what it carried. Courtenay read his eyes.

"Two of my men!" he said. "Found 'em up the pass. Gazi work, I think. They were cut all to pieces. There's a big lashkar gathering somewhere in the 'Hills,' and it might have been done by their skirmishers, but I don't think so."

"Who's supposed to be leading it?" "Can't find out," said Courtenay. Then he stepped aside to give orders to the escort. They carried the dead bodies into the fort.

"Know anything of Yasmini?" King asked, when the major stood in front of him again.

"By reputation, of course, yes. Famous person—sings like a bubbling dance like the devil—lives in Delhi—mean her?"

King nodded. "When did she start up the pass?" he asked.

"She didn't start! I know who goes up and who comes down."

"Know anything of Rewa Gunga?" King asked him.

"Not much. Tried to buy his mare. Seen the animal? Gad! I'd give a year's pay for that beast! He wouldn't sell and I don't blame him."

"He told me just now," said King, "that Yasmini went up the pass unaccompanied."

King looked over his shoulder to make sure that Ismail was bringing the little leather bag along.

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He drew out his wonderful cigarette case and offered it open to Courtenay, who hesitated, and then helped himself. King refused.

"Major Courtenay has just told me," said King, "that nobody resembling Yasmini has gone up the pass recently. Can you explain?"

"Do you mean, can I explain why the major failed to see her? 'Pon my soul, King sahib, d'you want me to insult the man? Yasmini is too jolly clever for me, or for any other man I ever met; and the major's a man, isn't he? He may pack the Khyber so full of men that there's only standing room and still she'll go up without his leave if she chooses! There is nobody like Yasmini in all the world!"

The Rangar was looking past him, facing the great gorge that lets the north of Asia trickle down into India and back again when weather and the tribes permit. His eyes had become interested in the distance. King wondered why—and looked—and saw. Courtenay saw, too.

"Hail that man and bring him here!" he ordered.

Ismail, keeping his distance with ears and eyes peeled, heard instantly and hurried off. Fifteen minutes later an Afridi stood scowling in front of them with a little letter in a cleft stick in his hand. He held it out and Courtenay took it and sniffed.

"Well—I'll be blessed! A note"—sniff-sniff—"on scented paper!" Sniff-sniff! "Carried down the Khyber in a split stick! Take it, King—it's addressed to you."

King obeyed and sniffed too. It smelt of something far more subtle than musk. He recognized the same strange scent that had been wafted from behind Yasmini's silken hangings in her room in Delhi. As he unfolded the note—it was not sealed—he found time for a swift glance at Rewa Gunga's face. The Rangar seemed interested and amused. The note, in English ran:

"Dear Captain King: Kindly be quick to follow me, because there is much talk of a lashkar getting ready for a raid. I shall wait for you in Khinjan, whither my messenger shall show the way. Please let him keep his rifle. Trust him, and Rewa Gunga and my thirty whom you brought with you. The messenger's name is Darya Kahn. Your servant, Yasmini."

He passed the note to Courtenay, who read it and passed it back.

"I'll find out," the major muttered, "how she got up the pass without my knowing it. Somebody's tail shall be twisted for this!"

But he did not find out until King told him, and that was many days later, when a terrible cloud no longer threatened India from the north.

CHAPTER VII.

"I think I envy you!" said Courtenay.

They were seated in Courtenay's tent, face to face across the low table, with guttering lights between and Ismail outside the tent handing plates and things to Courtenay's servant inside.

"You're about the first who has admitted it," said King.

Not far from them a herd of pack-camels grunted and bubbled after the evening meal. The evening breeze brought the smoke of dung fires down to them, and an Afghan—one of the little crowd of traders who had come down with the camels three hours ago—sang a walling song about his lady-love. Overhead the sky was like black velvet, pierced with silver holes.

"You see, you can't call our end of this business war—it's sport," said Courtenay. "Two battalions of Khyber rifles, hired to hold the pass against their own relations. Against them a couple of hundred thousand tribesmen, very hungry for loot, armed with up-to-date rifles, thanks to Russia yesterday and Germany today, and all perfectly well aware that a world war is in progress. That's sport, you know—not the 'image and likeness of war' that Jorrocks called it, but the real root. And you've got a mystery thrown in to give it piquancy. I haven't found out yet how Yasmini got up the pass without my knowledge. I thought it was a trick. Didn't believe she'd gone. Yet all my men swear they know she has gone, and not one of them will own to having seen her go! What d'you think of that?"

For a while, as he ate Courtenay's broiled quail, King did not answer. But the merry smile had left his eyes and he seemed for once to be letting his mind dwell on conditions as they concerned himself.

"How many men have you at the fort?" he asked at last.

"Two hundred—all natives."

"Like 'em?"

"What's the use of talking?" answered Courtenay. "You know what it means when men of an alien race stand up to you and grin when they salute. They're my own."

King nodded. "Die with you, eh?"

"To the last man," said Courtenay quietly with that conviction that can only be arrived at in one way, and that not the easiest.

"I'd die alone," said King. "I'll be

lonely in the 'Hills.' Got any more quail?"

And that was all he ever did say on that subject, then or at any other time.

"What shall you do first after you get up the pass? Call on your brother at All Masjid? He's likely to know a lot by the time you get there."

"Not sure," said King. "May and may not. I'd like to see him. Haven't seen the old chap in a donkey's age. How is he?"

"Well two days ago," said Courtenay.

"Here's wishing you luck!" said King. "It's time to go, sir."

He rose, and Courtenay walked with him to where his party waited in the dark, chilled by the cold wind whistling down the Khyber. Rewa Gunga sat, mounted, at their head, and close to him his personal servant rode another horse. Behind them were the mules, and then in a cluster, each with a load of some sort on his head, were the thirty prisoners, and Ismail took charge of them officiously. Darya Khan, the man who had brought the letter down the pass, kept close to Ismail.

King mounted, and Courtenay shook hands; then he went to Rewa Gunga's side and shook hands with him, too.

"Forward! March!" King ordered, and the little procession started.

"Oh, men of the 'Hills,' ye look like ghosts—like graveyard ghosts!" jeered Courtenay, as they all filed past him. "Ye look like dead men, going to be judged!"

Nobody answered. They strode behind the horses, with the swift, silent strides of men who are going home to the "Hills;" but even they,

the flame burned brighter and steadier and began to move and to grow.

"Halt!" King thundered; and his voice was sharp and unexpected as a pistol crack. This was something tangible, that a man could tackle—a perfect antidote for nerves.

The blue light continued on a zig-zag course, as if a man were running among boulders with an unusual sort of torch; and as there was no answer King drew his pistol, took about thirty seconds' aim and fired. He fired straight at the blue light.

It vanished instantly, into measureless black silence.

"Now you've jolly well done it, haven't you?" the Rangar laughed in his ear. "That was her blue light—Yasmini's!"

It was a minute before King answered, for both animals were all but frantic with their sense of their riders' state of mind; it needed horse-manship to get them back under control.

"How do you know whose light it was?" King demanded, when the horse and mare were head to head again.

"It was prearranged. She promised me a signal at the point where I am to leave the track!"

King drove both spurs home, and set his unwilling horse to scrambling downward at an angle he could not guess, into blackness he could feel, trusting the animal to find a footing where his own eyes could make out nothing.

To his disgust he heard the Rangar immediately. To his even greater disgust the black mare overtook him. And even then, with his own mount stumbling and nearly pitching him headforemost at each lurch, he was forced to admire the mare's goatlike agility, for she descended into the gorge in running leaps, never setting a wrong foot. When he and his horse reached the bottom at last he found the Rangar waiting for him.

"This way, sahib!"

The next he knew sparks from the black mare's heels were kicking up in front of him, and a wild ride had begun such as he had never yet dreamed of. There was no catching up, for the black mare could gallop two to his horse's one; but he set his teeth and followed into solid night, trusting ear, eye, guesswork and the god of the secret service men, who loves the reckless.

Once in every two minutes he caught sight for a second of the same blue siren light that had started the race. He suspected that there were many torches placed at intervals.

His own horse developed a speed and stamina he had not suspected, and probably the Rangar did not dare extend the mare to her limit in the dark; at all events, for ten, perhaps fifteen, minutes of breathless galloping he almost made a race of it, keeping the Rangar either within sight or sound.

But then the mare swerved suddenly behind a boulder and was gone. He spurred round the same great rock a minute later, and was faced by a blank wall of shale that brought his horse up all standing. It led steep up for a thousand feet to the skyline. There was not so much as a goat-track to show in which direction the mare had gone, nor a sound of any kind to guide him.

He dismounted and stumbled about on foot for about ten minutes with his eyes two feet from the earth, trying to find some trace of hoof. Then he listened, with his ear to the ground. There was no result.

He knew better than to shout. After some thought he mounted and began to hunt the way back, remembering turns and twists with a gift for direction that natives might well have envied him. He found his way back to the foot of the road at a trot, where ninety-nine men out of almost any hundred would have been lost hopelessly; and close to the road he overtook Darya Khan, hugging his rifle and staring about like a scorpion at bay.

"Did you expect that blue light, and this galloping away?" he asked.

"Nay, sahib; I knew nothing of it! I was told to lead the way to Khinjan."

"Come on, then!"

On the level road above King stared about him and felt in his pockets for a fresh cheroot. He struck a match and watched it to be sure his hand did not shake before he spoke. A man must command himself before trying it on others.

"Where are the others?" he asked, when he was certain of himself.

"Gone!" boomed Ismail.

King took a dozen pulls at the cheroot and stared about again. In the middle of the road stood his second horse, and three mules with his baggage, including the unmarked medicine chest. Close to them were three men, making the party now only six all told, including Darya Khan, himself and Ismail.

"Gone whither?" Ismail's voice was eloquent of shocked surprise. "They followed! Was it then thy baggage on the other mules? Were they thy men? They led the mules and went!"

"Who ordered them?"

"Allah! Need the night be ordered to follow the day?"

"And thou?"

"I am thy man! She bade me be thy man!"

"And these?"

"Try them!"

King bethought him of his wrist, that was heavy with the weight of gold on it. He drew back his sleeve and held it up.

"May God be with thee!" boomed all five men at once, and the Khyber night gave back their voices, like the echoing of a well.

King took his reins and mounted.



He Fired Straight at the Blue Light.

born in the "Hills" and knowing them as a wolf-pack knows its hunting ground, were awed by the gloom of Khyber mouth ahead. King's voice was the first to break the silence, and he did not speak until Courtenay was out of earshot. Then:

"Men of the 'Hills!' he called. "Kuch dar nahin hai!"

"Nahin hai! Hah!" shouted Ismail. "So speaks a man! Hear that, ye mountain folk! He says, 'There is no such thing as fear!'"

In his place in the lead, King whistled softly to himself; but he drew an automatic pistol from its place beneath his armpit and transferred it to a readier position.

Fear or no fear, Khyber mouth is haunted after dark by the men whose blood feuds are too reeking raw to let them dare go home and for whom the British hangman very likely waits a mile or two farther south. It is one of the few places in the world where a pistol is better than a thick stick.

Boulder, crag and loose rock faded into gloom behind; in front on both hands ragged hillsides were beginning to close up; and the wind, whose home is in Allah's refuse heap, whistled as it searched busily among the black ravines. Then presently the shadow of the thousand-foot-high Khyber walls began to cover them.

After a while King's cheroot went out, and he threw it away. A little later Rewa Gunga threw away his cigarette. After that, the veriest five-year-old among the Zakka Khels, watching sleepless over the rim of some stone watch tower, could have taken oath that the Khyber's unburied dead were prowling in search of empty graves. Probably their uncanny sense was their best protection; but Rewa Gunga chose to break it after a time.

"King sahib!" he called softly, repeating it louder and more loudly until King heard him. "Slowly! Not so fast! There are men among those boulders, and to go too fast is to make them think you are afraid! To seem afraid is to invite attack! Can we defend ourselves, with three firearms between us? Look! What is that?"

They were at the point where the road begins to lead uphill, westward, leaving the bed of a ravine and ascending to join the highway built by British engineers. Below, to left and right, was pit-mouth gloom, shadows amid shadows, full of eerie whistlings, and King felt the short hair on his neck begin to rise. He urged his horse forward. The Rangar followed him, close up, and both horse and mare sensed excitement.

"Look, sahib!"

After a second or two he caught a glimpse of bluish flame that flashed suddenly and died again, somewhere below to the right. Then all at once

"What now?" asked Ismail, picking up the leather bag that he regarded as his own particular charge.

"Forward!" said King. "Come along!"

He began to set a fairly fast pace, Ismail leading the spare horse and the others towing the mules along. Except for King, who was modern and out of the picture, they looked like Old Testament patriarchs, hurrying out of Egypt, as depicted in the illustrated Bibles of a generation ago—all leaning forward—each man carrying a staff—and none looking to the right or left.

"Forward!" growled Ismail. "With this man it is ever 'forward!' Is there neither rest nor fear? Has he bewitched him? Hah! Ye lazy ones! Ho! Sons of sloth! Urge the mules faster! Beat the led horse!"

So in weird, wailing moonlight, King led them forward, straight up the narrowing gorge, between cliffs that seemed to fray the very bosom of the sky. He smoked a cigar and stared at the view, as if he were off to the mountains for a month's sport with dependable shikarris whom he knew. Nobody could have looked at him and guessed he was not enjoying himself.

"That man," mumbled Ismail behind him, "is not as other sahibs I have known. He is a man, this one! He will do unexpected things!"

"Forward!" King called to them, thinking they were grumbling. "Forward, men of the 'Hills!'"

CHAPTER VIII.

After a time King urged his horse to a jog-trot, and they trotted forward until the bed of the Khyber began to grow very narrow, and All Masjid fort could not be much more than a mile away, at the widest guess. Then King drew rein and dismounted, for he would have been challenged had he ridden much farther. A challenge in the Khyber after dark consists invariably of a volley at short range, with the mere words afterward, and the wise man takes precautions.

"Off with the mules' packs!" he ordered, and the men stood round and stared. Darya Khan, leaning on the only rifle in the party, grinned like a post-office letter box.

"Truly," growled Ismail, forgetting past expressions of a different opinion, "this man is as mad as all the other Englishmen."

"Were you ever bitten by one?" wondered King aloud.

"God forbid!"

"Then off with the packs—and hurry!"

Ismail began to obey.

"Thou! Lord of the Rivers! (For that is what Darya Khan means.) What is thy calling?"

"Badragga" (guide), he answered. "Did she not send me back down the pass to be a guide? If she says I am badragga, shall any say she lies?"

"I say thou art unpicker of mules' burdens!" answered King. "Begin!"

For answer the fellow grinned from ear to ear and thrust the rifle barrel forward insolently. King, with the movement of determination that a man makes when about to force conclusions, drew up his sleeves above the wrist. At that instant the moon shone through the mist and the gold bracelet glittered in the moonlight.

"May God be with thee!" said "Lord of the Rivers" at once. And without another word he laid down his rifle and went to help off-load the mules."

King stepped aside and cursed softly. But for a vein of wisdom that underlay his pride he would have pock-

eted the bracelet there and then and have refused to wear it again. But as he sweated his pride he overheard Ismail growl:

"Good for thee! He had taught these obedience in another bat of the eye!"

"I obey her!" muttered Darya Khan. "I, too," said Ismail. "So shall he before the week dies! But now it is good to obey him. He is an ugly man to disobey!"

"I obey him until she sets me free, then," grumbled Darya Khan.

"Better for thee!" said Ismail.

King meets his brother at All Masjid fort and they hold a memorable conference. The British captain disappears in the darkness and a strange native medicine man takes his place.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

At That Instant the Moon Shone Through the Mist and the Gold Bracelet Glittered in the Moonlight.

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