

King of the Khyber Rifles

A Romance of Adventure

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KING SEES YASMINI FOR THE FIRST TIME WHEN SHE COMES TO DANCE BEFORE THE THOUSANDS OF WARRIORS ASSEMBLED IN THE CAVERN

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 goes with her to Khyber to meet 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 Bangar into going ahead. The Bangar deserts him at a dangerous time. He meets his brother at All Masjid fort. The disguise he assumes there fools even the sharp-eyed cutthroats composing his guard. He enters Khinjan caves, thanks to his lying guides, and at a clinic hears of an impending revolt led by Bull-With-a-Beard, and goes to a meeting in the cavern.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"Aye! The liar says the Germans gave it to him. He swears they will send more. Who are the Germans? Who is a man who talks of a jihad that is to be, that he should have gold coin given him by unbelievers? I saw a German once, at Nuklae. He ate pig-meat and washed it down with wine. Are such men sons of the Prophet? Wait and watch, say it!"

"Money?" said King. "And should so more money come?"

This was courteous conversation and received as such—many a long league removed from curiosity.

"Who am I to forget a man's kismet? I know what I know, and I think what I think! I know thee, hakim, for a gentle fellow, who hurt me almost not at all in the drawing of a bullet out of my flesh. What knowest thou about me?"

"That I will dress the wound for thee again!"

Artless statements are as useful in their way as artless questions. Let the guile lie deep, that is all.

"Nay, nay! For she said nay! Shall I fall foul of her, for the sake of a small bandage?"

The temptation was terrific to ask why she had given that order, but King resisted it; and presently it occurred to the Pathan that his own theories on the subject might be of interest.

"She will use thee for a reward," he said. "He who shall win and keep her



A Wretched-Looking Baluchi Was Thrust Forward at a Run, With Arms Lashed to His Sides.

favor may have his hurts dressed and his belly dosed. Her enemies may rot."

"Does she call the mullah Muhammad Anim enemy?" King asked him.

"Nay, she never mentions him by name."

CHAPTER XIII.

The dance went on for fifteen minutes yet, but then—quite unexpectedly—all the arena guards together fired a volley at the roof, and the dance stopped as if every dancer had been hit. Panting—foaming at the mouth, some of them—the dancers ran to their seats and set the crowd surging again, leaving the arena empty of all but the guards.

Now a man stood up near the edge of the crowd whom King recognized; and recognition brought no joy with it. The mullah without hair or eyelashes, who had admitted him and his party through the mosque into the caves, strode out to the middle of the arena all alone, strutting and swaggering. He recalled the man's last words and drew no consolation from them, either.

"Many have entered! Some went out by a different road!"

Cold chills went down his back. All at once Ismail's manner became unencouraging. He ceased to make a fuss over the dancer and began to eye King sidewise, until at last he seemed unable to contain the malice that would well forth.

"At the gate there were only words!"

he whispered. "Here in this cavern men wait for proof!"

He licked his teeth suggestively, as a wolf does when he contemplates a meal. Then, as an afterthought, as though ashamed, "I love thee! Thou art a man after my own heart! But I am her man! Wait and see!"

The mullah in the arena, blinking with his lashed eyes, held both arms up for silence in the attitude of a Christian priest blessing a congregation. The great cavern grew still, and only the river could be heard sucking hungrily between the smooth stone banks.

"God is great!" the mullah howled. The crowd thundered in echo to him; and then the vault took up the echoes.

"And Muhammad is his prophet!" howled the mullah. Instantly they answered him again. "His prophet—his prophet—is his prophet!" said the stalactites, in loud barks—then in murmurs—then in awe-struck whispers.

That seemed to be all the religious ritual Khinjan remembered or could tolerate. Considering that the mullah, too, must have killed his man in cold blood before earning the right to be there, perhaps it was enough—too much. There were men not far from King who shuddered.

"There are strangers!" announced the mullah, as a man might say, "I smell a rat!" But he did not look at anybody in particular; he blinked at the crowd.

"Bring them!" he shouted, and King suppressed a shudder—for what proof had he of right to be there, beyond Ismail's verbal corroboration of a lie? Would Ismail lie for him again? he wondered. And if so, would the lie be any use?

Not far from where King sat there was an immediate disturbance in the crowd, and a wretched-looking Baluchi was thrust forward at a run, with arms lashed to his sides and a pitiful look of terror on his face. Two more Baluchis were hustled along after him, protesting a little, but looking almost as hopeless.

Once in the arena, the guards took charge of all three of them and lined them up facing the mullah, clubbing them with their rifle-butts to get quicker obedience. The crowd began to be noisy again, but the mullah signed for silence.

"These are traitors!" he howled, and his voice was like a wolf's at hunting time. "Hear, and be warned!"

The crowd grew very still, but King saw that some men licked their lips, as if they well knew what was coming. "These three men came, and one was a new man!" the mullah howled. "The other two were his witnesses! All three swore that the first man came from slaying an unbeliever in the teeth of written law. They said he ran from the law. So, as the custom is, I let all three enter!"

"Good!" said the crowd. "Good!" They might have been five thousand judges, judging in equity, so grave they were. Yet they licked their lips.

"But later, word came to me saying they are liars. So—again as the custom is—I ordered them bound and held! Does any speak for them?"

"Speak for them?" said the roof.

There was silence. Then there was a murmur of astonishment. Over opposite to where King sat the mullah stood up, who the Pathan had said was "Bull-with-a-beard"—Muhammad Anim.

"The men are mine!" he growled. His voice was like a bear's at bay; it was low, but it carried strangely. And as he spoke he swung his great head between his shoulders, like a bear that means to charge. "The proof they brought has been stolen! They had good proof! I speak for them! The men are mine!"

The Pathan nudged King in the ribs with an elbow like a club and tickled his ear with hot breath.

"Bull-with-a-beard speaks truth!" he growled. "Truth and a lie together! Good may it do him and them! They die, they three Baluchis!"

"Proof!" howled the mullah who had no hair or eyelashes.

"Proof! Show us proof!" yelled the crowd.

The Pathan next King leaned over to whisper to him again, but stiffened in

the act. There was a great gasp the same instant, as the whole crowd caught its breath all together. The mullah in the middle froze into immobility. Bull-with-a-beard stood mumbling, swaying his great head from side to side, no longer suggestive of a bear about to charge, but of one who hesitates.

The crowd was staring at the end of the bridge. King stared, too, and caught his own breath. For Yasmini stood there, smiling on them all as the new moon smiles down on the Khyber! She had come among them like a spirit, all unheralded.

So much more beautiful than the one likeness King had seen of her that for a second he doubted who she was, she stood there, human and warm and real, who had begun to seem a myth, clad in gauzy silk transparent stuff that made no secret of syphilitic shapeliness and looking nearly light enough to blow away. Her feet—and they were the most marvelously molded things he had ever seen—were naked and played restlessly on the naked stone. Not one part of her was still for a fraction of a second; yet the whole effect was of insolently lazy ease.

Her eyes blazed brighter than the little jewels stitched to her gossamer dress, and when a man once looked at them he did not find it easy to look away again. Even mullah Muhammad Anim seemed transfixed, like a great foolish animal.

But King was staring very hard indeed at something else—mentally cursing the plain glass spectacles he wore, that had begun to film over and dim his vision. There were two bracelets on her arm, both barbaric things of solid gold. The smaller of the two was on her wrist and the larger on her upper arm, but they were so alike, except for size, and so exactly like the one Rewa Gunga had given him in her name and that had been stolen from him in the night, that he ran the risk of removing the glasses a moment to stare with unimpeded eyes. Even then the distance was too great. He could not quite see.

But her eyes began to search the crowd in his direction, and then he knew two things absolutely. He was sitting where she had ordered Ismail to place him; for she picked him out almost instantly, and laughed as if somebody had struck a silver bell. And one of those bracelets was the one that he had worn; for she flaunted it at him, moving her arm so that the light should make the gold glitter.

Then, perhaps because the crowd had begun to whisper, and she wanted all attention, she raised both arms to toss back the golden hair that came cascading nearly to her knees. And as if the crowd knew that symptom well, it drew its breath in sharply and grew very still.

"Muhammad Anim!" she said, and she might have been wooing him. "That was a devil's trick!"

It was rather an astounding statement, coming from lovely lips in such a setting. It was rather suggestive of a driver's whiplash, flicked through the air for a beginning. Muhammad Anim continued glaring and did not answer her, so in her own good time, when she had tossed her golden hair back once or twice again, she developed her meaning.

"We who are free of Khinjan caves do not send men out to bring recruits. We know better than to bid our men tell lies for others at the gate. Nor, seeking proof for our new recruit, do we send men to hunt a head for him—not even those of us who have a lashkar that we call our own, mullah Muhammad Anim! Each of us earns his own way in!"

The mullah Muhammad Anim began to stroke his beard, but he made no answer.

"And—mullah Muhammad Anim, thou wandering man of God—when that lashkar has foolishly been sent and has failed, is it written in the Kalamullah saying we should pretend there was a head, and that the head was stolen? A lie is a lie, Muhammad Anim! Wandering perhaps is good, if in search of the way. Is it good to lose the way, and to lie, thou true follower of the Prophet?"

She smiled, tossing her hair back. Her eyes challenged, her lips mocked him and her chin scorned. The crowd breathed hard and watched. The mullah muttered something in his beard, and sat down, and the crowd began to roar applause at her. But she checked it with a regal gesture, and a glance of contempt at the mullah that was alone worth a journey across the "Hills" to see.

"Guards!" she said quietly. And the crowd's sigh then was like the night wind in a forest.

"Away with those three of Muhammad Anim's men!"

Twelve of the arena guards threw down their shields with a sudden clatter and seized the prisoners, four to each. The crowd shivered with delicious anticipation. The doomed men neither struggled nor cried, for fatalism is an anodyne as well as an explosive. King set his teeth. Yasmini, with both hands behind her head, continued to smile down on them all as sweetly as the stars shine on a battlefield.

She nodded once; and then all was over in a minute. With a raving "Ho!" and a run, the guards lifted their victims shoulder high and bore them forward. At the river bank they paused for a second to swing them. Then, with another "Ho!" they threw them like dead rubbish into the swift black water.

There was only one wild scream that went echoing and re-echoing to the roof. There was scarcely a splash, and no extra ripple at all. No heads came up again to gasp. No fingers clutched at the surface. The fearful speed of the river sucked them under, to grind and churn and pound them through long caverns underground and hurl them at last over the great cataract toward the middle of the world.

"Ah-h-h-h!" sighed the crowd in ecstasy.

"Is there no other stranger?" asked Yasmini, searching for King again with her amazing eyes. The skin all down his back turned there and then into gooseflesh. And as her eyes met his she laughed like a bell at him. She knew! She knew who he was, how he had entered, and how he felt. Not a doubt of it!

CHAPTER XIV.

"Kurram Khan!" the lashed mullah howled, like a lone wolf in the moonlight, and King stood up. In that grim minute he managed to seem about as much at ease as a native hakim ought to feel at such an initiation.

"Come forward!" the mullah howled, and he obeyed, treading gingerly between men who were at no pains to let him by, and silently blessing them, because he was not really in any hurry at all. Yasmini looked lovely from a distance, and life was sweet.

"Who are his witnesses?"

"I!" shouted Ismail, jumping up. "I!" cracked the roof. "I!"

So that for a second King almost believed he had a crowd of men to swear for him and did not hear Darya Khan at all, who rose from a place not very far behind where he had sat.

Ismail followed him in a hurry, like a man wading a river with loose clothes gathered in one arm and the other arm ready in case of falling. Darya Khan did not go so fast. As he forced his way forward a man passed him up the wooden box that King had used to stand on; he seized it in both hands with a grin and a jest and went to stand behind King and Ismail, in line with the lashed mullah, facing Yasmini. Yasmini smiled at them all as if they were actors in her comedy, and she well pleased with them.

"Look ye!" howled the mullah. "Look ye and look well, for this is to be one of us!"

King felt ten thousand eyes burn holes in his back, but the one pair of eyes that mocked him from the bridge was more disconcerting.

"Turn, Kurram Khan! Turn that all may see!"

Feeling like a man on a spit, he revolved slowly. By the time he had turned once completely around he had decided that Yasmini meant he should be frightened, but not much hurt just yet. So he ceased altogether to feel frightened and took care to look more scared than ever.

"Speak, Kurram Khan!" Yasmini purred, smiling her loveliest. "Tell them whom you slew."

King turned and faced the crowd, raising himself on the balls of his feet to shout, like a man facing thousands of troops on parade. He nearly gave himself away, for habit had him un-awares. A native hakim, given the stoutest lungs in all India, would not have shouted in that way.

"Capitain Attleystan King!" he roared. And he nearly jumped out of his skin when his own voice came rattling back at him from the roof overhead.

Yasmini chuckled as a little rill will sometimes chuckle among ferns. It was devilish. It seemed to say there were traps not far ahead.

"Where was he slain?" asked the mullah.

"In the Khyber pass," said King. "Now give proof!" said the mullah.

"Words at the gate—proof in the cavern! Without good proof, there is only one way out of here!"

"Proof!" the crowd thundered. "Proof!" the roof echoed.

There was no need for Darya Khan to whisper. King's hands were behind him, and he had seen what he had seen and guessed what he had guessed while he was turning to let the crowd look at him. His fingers closed on human hair.

"Nay, it is short!" hissed Darya Khan. "Take the two ears, or hold it by the jawbone! Hold it high in both hands!"

King obeyed, without looking at the thing, and Ismail, turning to face the crowd, rose on tiptoe and filled his lungs for the effort of his life.

"The head of Capitain Attleystan King—infidel—kafir—British arr-ker!" he howled.

"Good!" the crowd howled. "Good! Throw it!"

The crowd's roar and the roof's echoes combined in pandemonium.

"Throw it to them, Kurram Khan!" Yasmini purred from the bridge end, speaking as softly and as sweetly as if she coaxed a child. "It is the custom!"

"Throw it! Throw it! Throw it!" The crowd was growing impatient. Many men were standing, waving their arms to draw attention to themselves. Catching Yasmini's eyes, he knew it had not entered her head that he might disobey.

He looked past her toward the river. There were no guards near enough to prevent what he intended; but he had to bear in mind that the guards had rifles, and if he acted too suddenly one of them might shoot at him unbidden. Holding the head before him with both hands, he began to walk toward the river, edging all the while a little toward the crowd as if meaning to get nearer before he threw. He reached the river and stood there.

His next move made every savage who watched him gasp because of its very unexpectedness. He held the head in both hands, threw it far out into the river and stood to watch it sink. Then, without visible emotion of any kind, he walked back stolidly to face Yasmini at the bridge end, with shoulders a little more stubborn now than they ought to be, and chin a shade too high, for there never was a man who could act quite perfectly.

"Thou fool!" Yasmini whispered through lips that did not move. She



The Crowd Was Growing Impatient.

"Throw it! Throw it!"

betrayed a flash of temper like a trapped she-tiger's, but followed it instantly with her loveliest smile.

"Slay him!" yelled a lone voice, that was greeted by an approving murmur.

"This is a darbar!" Yasmini announced in a rising, ringing voice. "My darbar, for I summoned it! Did I invite any man to speak?"

There was silence, as a whipped unwilling pack is silent.

"Speak, thou Kurram Khan! Tell them why!" she said, smiling. No man could have guessed by the tone of her voice whether she was for him or against him, and the crowd, beginning again to whisper, watched to see which way the cat would jump.

He bowed low to her three times—very low indeed and very slowly, for he had to think. Then he turned his back and repeated the obeisance to the crowd.

"My brothers," he said, and his voice became that of a man whose advice has been asked, and who gives it freely. "Ye saw this night how one man entered here on the strength of an oath and a promise. All he lacked was proof. And I had proof. Ye saw! How easy would it not have been, had I thrown that head to you, for a traditor to catch it and hide it in his clothes, and make away with it! He could have used it to admit to these caves—why—even an Englishman, my brothers! If that had happened, ye would have blamed me!"

Yasmini smiled. Taking its cue from her, the crowd murmured, scarcely as- sent, but rather recognition of the hakim's adroitness. The game was not won; there lacked a touch to tip the scales in his favor, and Yasmini supplied it with ready genius.

"The hakim speaks the truth!" she laughed.

King turned about instantly to face her, but he saluted so low that she could not have seen his expression had she tried.

"If ye wish it, I will order him tossed into Earth's Drink after those other three."

Muhammad Anim rose, stroking his beard and rocking where he stood.

"It is the law!" he growled, and King shuddered.

"It is the law," Yasmini answered in a voice that rang with pride and insolence, "that none interrupt me while I speak! For such ill-mannered ones Earth's Drink hungers! Will you test my authority, Muhammad Anim? Think ye! If that head had only fallen into Muhammad Anim's lap, the mullah might have smuggled in another man with it!"

A roar of laughter greeted that thrust. Many men who had not laughed at the mullah's first discomfiture joined in now. Muhammad Anim sat and fidgeted, meeting nobody's eye and answering nothing.

"So it seems to me good," Yasmini said, in a voice that did not echo any more but rang very clear and true (she seemed to know the trick of the roof, and to use the echo or not as she chose), "to let this hakim live! He shall meditate in his cave a while, and perhaps he shall be beaten, lest he dare offend again. He can no more escape from Khinjan caves than the

women who are prisoners here. He may therefore live!"

There was utter silence. Men looked at one another and at her, and her blazing eyes searched the crowd swiftly. It was plain enough that there were at least two parties there, and that none dared oppose Yasmini's will for fear of the others.

"To thy seat, Kurram Khan!" she ordered, when she had waited a full minute and no man spoke.

He wasted no time. He hurried out of the arena as fast as he could walk, with Ismail and Darya Khan close at his heels. Ismail overtook him, seized him by the shoulders, hugged him, and dragged him to the empty seat next to the Orakzal Pathan. There he hugged him until his ribs cracked.

"Ready o' wit!" he growled. "Ready o' tongue! Light o' life! Man after mine own heart! Hey, I love thee! Readily I would be thy man, but for being hers! Turned the joke on Muhammad Anim! Turned it against her enemy and raised a laugh against him from his own men! Ready o' wit! Shameless one! Lucky one! Allah was surely good to thee!"

"Have they taken All Masjid fort?" King whispered.

"Nay, how should I know? Ask her! She knows more than any man knows!"

King turned to ask the same question of his friend the Orakzal Pathan; but the Pathan would have none of his questions, he was busy listening for whispers from the crowd, watching with both eyes, and he shoved King aside.

The crowd was very far from being satisfied. An angry murmur had begun to fill the cavern as a hive is filled with the song of bees at swarming time. But even so, surmise what one might, it was not easy to persuade the eye that Yasmini's careless smile and easy poised were assumed. If she recognized indignation and feared it, she disguised her fear amazingly. Leisurely, languidly, she raised both arms until she looked like an angel poised for flight. The little jewels stitched to her gauzy dress twinkled like fireflies as she moved. The crowd gasped sharply. She had it by the heart-strings.

She called, and four guards got under one shield, bowing their heads and resting the great rim on their shoulders. They carried it beneath her and stood still. With a low delicious laugh, sweet and true, she sprang on it, and the shield scarcely trembled; she seemed lighter than the silk her dress was woven from!

They carried her so, and in the midst of the arena before they had ceased moving she began to sing, with her head thrown back and bosom swelling like a bird's.

The East would ever rather draw its own conclusions from a hint let fall than be puzzled by what the West believes are facts. And parables are not good evidence in courts of law, which is always a consideration. So her song took the form of a parable.

And to say that she took hold of them and played rhapsodies of her own making on their heartstrings would be to undervalue what she did. They were dumb while she sang, but they rose at her. Not a force in the world could have kept them down, for she was deftly touching cords that stirred other forces—subtle, mysterious, mesmerizing, which the old East understands—which Muhammad the prophet understood when he harnessed evil in the shafts with men and wrote rules for their driving in a book. They rose in silence and stood tense.

She sang of a wolf-pack gathering from the valleys in the winter snow—a very hungry wolf-pack. Then of a stalled ox, grown very fat from being cared for. Of the "Heart of the Hills" that awoke in the worm of the "Hills," and that listened and watched.

"Now, is she the 'Heart of the Hills'?" King wondered. The rumors men had heard and told again in India, about the "Heart of the Hills" in Khyber seemed to have foundation.

He thought of the strange knife, wrapped in a handkerchief under his shirt, with its bronze blade and gold hilt in the shape of a woman dancing. The woman dancing was astonishingly like Yasmini, standing on the shield!

She sang about the owners of the stalled ox, who were busy at bay, defending themselves and their ox from another wolf-pack in another direction "far beyond."

She urged them to wait a little while. The ox was big enough and fat enough to nourish all the wolves in the world for many seasons. Let them wait, then, until another, greater wolf-pack joined them, that they might go hunting all together, overwhelm its present owners and devour the ox! So urged the "Heart of the Hills," speaking to the mountain wolves, according to Yasmini's song.

The little cubs in the burrows know. Are ye grown wolves, who hurry so?

She paused, for effect; but they gave tongue then because they could not help it, and the cavern shook to their terrific worship.

"Allah! Allah!"

They summoned God to come and see the height and depth and weight of their allegiance to her! And because for their thunder there was no more chance of being heard, she dropped from the shield like a blossom. No sound of falling could have been heard in all that din, but one could see she made no sound. The shield bearers ran back to the bridge and stood below it, eyes agape.

Disguised as he is, King is placed on trial for his life. At a critical moment a human head is thrust into his hands. When he sees the face, the shock is terrible. The victim is—

(TO BE CONTINUED.)