

King of the Khyber Rifles

A Romance of Adventure

By TALBOT MUNDY
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CHAPTER XXI—Continued.

But out of the corner of his eye, and once or twice by looking back deliberately, King saw that Ismail was taking the members of his new band one by one and whispering to them. What he said was a mystery, but as they talked each man looked at King. And the more they talked the better pleased they seemed. And as the day wore on the more deferential they grew. By midday King wanted to dismount there were three at least to hold his stirrup and ten to help him mount again.

Four thousand men with women and children and baggage do not move so swiftly as one man or a dozen, especially in the "Hills," where discipline is reckoned beneath a proud man's honor. There were many miles to go before Khinjan when night fell and the mullah bade them camp. He bade them camp because they would have done it otherwise in any case.

When the evening meal was eaten, and sentries had been set at every vantage point, there came another order from the mullah. The women and children were to be left in camp next dawn, and to remain there until sent for. There was murmuring at that around the camp, and especially among King's contingent. But King laughed.

"It is good!" he said.
"Why? How so?" they asked him.
"Bid your women make for the Khyber soon after the mullah marches tomorrow. Bid them travel down the Khyber until we and they meet!"

"But—"
"Please yourselves, sahibs!" The hakim's air was one of supreme indifference. "As for me, I leave no women behind me in the mountains. I am content."

They murmured a while, but they gave the orders to their women, and King watched the women nod.

Even as Yasmini had tested him and tried him before tempting him at last, she must be watching him now, for even the East repeats itself. She had sent Ismail for that purpose. It was likely that her course would depend on his. If he failed, she was done with him. If he succeeded in establishing a strong position of his own, she would yield. With or without Ismail's aid, with or without his enmity, he must control his eighty men and give the slip to the mullah, and he went at once about the best way to do both.

"We will go now," he said quietly. "That sentry in yonder shadow has his back turned. He has overreached. We will rush him and put good running between us and the mullah."

Surprised into obedience, and too delighted at the prospect of action to wonder why they should obey a hakim so, they slung on their bandoliers and made ready. Ismail brought up King's horse and he mounted. And then at King's word all eighty made a sudden swoop on the drowsy sentry and took him unawares. They tossed him over the cliff, too startled to scream an alarm; and though sentries on either hand heard them and shouted, they were gone like wind-blown ghosts of dead men before the mullah even knew what was happening.

They did not halt until not one of them could run another yard, King trusting to his horse to find a footing along the cliff-tops, and to the men to find the way.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Whither?" one whispered to King. "To Khinjan!" he answered; and that was enough. Each whispered to the other, and they all became fired with curiosity more potent than money bribes.

When he halted at last and dismounted and sat down and the stragglers caught up, panting, they held a council of war all together, with Ismail sitting at King's back and leaning a chin on his shoulder in order to hear better. Bone pressed on bone, and the place grew numb; King shook him off a dozen times; but each time Ismail set his chin back on the same spot, as a dog will that listens to his master. Yet he insisted he was her man, and not King's.

"Now, ye men of the 'Hills,'" said King, "listen to me who am political-offender - with - reward - for - capture-offered!" That was a gem of a title. It fired their imaginations. "I know things that no soldier would find out in a thousand years, and I will tell you some of what I know."

Now he had to be careful. If he were to invent too much they might denounce him as a traitor to the "Hills" in general. If he were to tell them too little they would lose interest and might very well desert him at the first pinch. He must feel for the middle way and upset no prejudices.

"She has discovered that this mullah Muhammad Anim is no true muslim, but an unbelieving dog of a foreigner from Farangistan! She has discovered that he plans to make himself an emperor in these hills, and to sell hillmen into slavery! Might as well serve the mullah up hot while about it! Beyond any doubt not much more than a rifle away the mullah was

getting even by condemning the lot of them to death. "An eye for the risk of an eye!" say the unforgiving "Hills." "If one of us should go back into his camp now he would be tortured. Be sure of that."

Breathing deeply in the darkness, they nodded, as if the dark had eyes. Ismail's chin drove a fraction deeper into his shoulder.

"Now ye know—for all men know—that the entrance into Khinjan caves is free to any man who can tell a lie without flinching. It is the way out again that is not free. How many men do ye know that have entered and never returned?"

They all nodded again. It was common knowledge that Khinjan was a very graveyard of the presumptuous. "She has set a trap for the mullah. She will let him and all his men enter and will never let them out again!"

"How knowest thou?" This from two men, one on either hand.
"Was I never in Khinjan caves?" he retorted. "Whence came I? I am her man, sent to help trap the mullah! I would have trapped all of you, but for being weary of these 'Hills' and wishing to go back to India and be pardoned! That is who I am! That is how I know!"

Their breath came and went sibilantly, and the darkness was alive with the excitement they thought themselves too warrior-like to utter.

"But what will she do then?" asked somebody.
King searched his memory, and in a moment there came back to him a picture of the hurrying Jezalchi he had held up in the Khyber pass, and recollection of the man's words.

"Know ye not," he said, "that long ago she gave leave to all who ate salt to be true to the salt? She gave the Khyber Jezalchis leave to fight against her. Be sure, whatever she does, she will stand between no man and his pardon!"

"But will she lead a jihad? We will not fight against her!"
"Nay," said King, drawing his breath in. Ismail's chin felt like a knife against his collar bone, and Ismail's iron fingers clutched his arm. It was time to give his hostage to Dame Fortune. "She will go down into India and use her influence in the matter of the pardons!"

"I believe thou art a very great liar indeed!" said the man who lacked part of his nose. "The Pathan went, and he did not come back. What proof have we?"

"Ye have me!" said King. "If I show you no proof, how can I escape you?"

They all grunted agreement as to that. King used his elbow to hit Ismail in the ribs. He did not dare speak to him; but now was the time for Ismail to carry information to her, supposing that to be his job. And after a minute Ismail rolled into a shadow and was gone. King gave him twenty minutes' start, letting his men rest their legs and exercise their tongues.

Now that he was out of the mullah's clutches—and he suspected Yasmini would know of it within an hour or two, and before dawn in any event—he began to feel like a player in a game of chess who foresees his opponent mate in so many moves.

If Yasmini were to let the mullah and his men into the caves and to join forces with him in there, he would at least have time to hurry back to India with his eighty men and give warning. He might have time to call up the Khyber Jezalchis and blockade the caves before the hive could swarm, and he chuckled to think of the hope of that.

On the other hand, if there was to be a battle royal between Yasmini and the mullah, he would be there to watch it and to comfort India with the news.

"Now we will go on again, in order to be close to Khinjan at break of day," he said, and they all got up and obeyed him as if his word had been law to them for years. Of all of them he was the only man in doubt—he who seemed most confident of all.

They swung along into the darkness under low-hung stars, trailing behind King's horse, with only half a dozen of them a hundred yards or so ahead as an advance guard, and all of them expecting to see Khinjan loom above each next valley, for distances and darkness are deceptive in the "Hills," even to trained eyes. Suddenly the advance guard halted, but did not shoot. And as King caught up with them he saw they were talking with someone.

He had to ride up close before he recognized the Orakzal Pathan.
"Salaam!" said the fellow with a grin. "I bring one hundred and eleven!"

As he spoke graveyard shadows rose out of the darkness around and leaned on rifles.

"Be ye men all ex-soldiers of the raj?" King asked them.
"Aye!" they growled in chorus.
"Who gave you leave to come?" King asked.

"None! He told us of the pardons and we came!"
"Aye!" said the Orakzal Pathan, drawing King aside. "But she gave me leave to seek them out and tempt them!"

"And what does she intend?" King asked him suddenly.
"She? Ask Allah, who put the spirit in her! How should I know?"

"We will march again, my brothers!" King shouted, and they streamed along behind him, now with no advance guard, but with the Orakzal Pathan striding beside King's horse, with a great hand on the saddle. Like the others, he seemed decided in his mind that the hakim ought not to be allowed much chance to escape.

Just as the dawn was tinting the surrounding peaks with softest rose they topped a ridge, and Khinjan lay below them across the mile-wide bonedry valley. And while they watched, and the Khinjan men were beginning to murmur (for they needed no last view of the place to satisfy any longings!) none else than Ismail rose from behind a rock and came to King's stirrup. He tugged and King backed his horse until they stood together apart.

"She sends this message," said Ismail, showing his teeth in the most peculiar grin that surely the "Hills" ever witnessed. "Many of her men, who have never been in the army, are none the less true to her, and she will not leave them to the mullah's mercy. They will leave the caves in a little while, and will come up here. They are to go down into India and be made prisoners if the sarkar will not enlist them. You are to wait for them here."

"Is that all her message?" King asked him.
"Nay. That is none of it! This is her message: THOU SHALT KNOW THIS DAY, THOU ENGLISHMAN, WHETHER OR NOT SHE TRULY LOVED THEE! THERE SHALL BE PROOF SUCH AS EVEN THOU SHALT UNDERSTAND!"

Ismail slipped away and lost himself among the men, and none of them seemed to notice that he had been away and had come again. It was a little more than an hour after dawn and the chilled rocks were beginning to grow warmer when the head of a procession came out of Khinjan gate and started toward them over the valley. In all more than five hundred men emerged and about a hundred women and children. Then:

"Muhammad Anim comes!" shouted a voice from a crag top.

They snuggled into better hiding, and there was no thought now of leaving before the mullah should go by. It needed an effort to quiet them when the mullah rose into view at last above the rise and paused for a minute to stare across at Khinjan before leading his four thousand down and onward. He was silent as an image, but his men roared like a river in flood and he made no effort to check them.

He dismounted, for he had to, and tossed his reins to the nearest man with the air of an emperor. And he led the way down the cliffs without hesitation, striding like a mountaineer. His men followed him noisily.

It was thirty minutes after the last of the mullah's men had vanished through the gate, and his own men in dozens and twenties were scattered

along the cliff-top arguing against delay with growing rancor, when a lone horseman galloped out of Khinjan gate and started across the valley. He rode recklessly. He was either panic-stricken or else bolder than the devil.

In a minute King had recognized the mare, and so had the eyes of fifty men around him. No man with half an eye for a horse could have failed to recognize that black mare, having ever seen her once. In another two minutes King had recognized the Rangar's silken turban.

Most of the men were staring downward at the Rangar's head as he urged the mare up the cliff path, when the explanation of Yasmini's message came. It was only King, urged by some intuition, who had his eyes fixed on Khinjan.

There came a shock that actually swayed the hill they stood on. The

mare on the path below missed her footing and fell a dozen feet, only to get up again and scramble as if a thousand devils were behind her, the Rangar riding her grimly, like a jockey in a race. Three more shocks followed. A great slice of Khinjan suddenly caved in with a roar, and smoke and dust burst upward through the tumbling crust.

There was a pause after that, as if the waiting elements were gathering strength. For ten minutes they watched and scarcely breathed. Rewa Gunga gained the summit and, dismounting, stood by King with the reins over his arm. The mare was too blown to do anything but stand and tremble. And King was too enthralled to do anything but stare.

"That is what a woman can do for a man!" said Rewa Gunga grimly. "She set a fuse and exploded all the dynamite. There were tons of it! The galleries must have fallen in, one on the other! A thousand men digging for a thousand years could never get into Khinjan now, and the only way out is down Earth's Drink! She bade me come and bid you goodbye, sahib. I would have stayed in there, but she commanded me. She said, 'Tell King sahib my love was true. Tell him I give him India and all Asia that were at my mercy!'"

While the Rangar spoke there came three more earth tremors in swift succession, and a thunder out of Khinjan as if the very "Hills" were coming to an end. The mare grew frantic and the Rangar summoned six men to hold her.

Suddenly, right over the top of Khinjan's upper rim, where only the eagles ever perched, there burst a column of water, immeasurable, huge, that for a moment blotted out the sun. It rose sheer upward, curved on itself, and fell in a million-ton deluge on to Khinjan and into Khinjan valley, hissing and roaring and thundering.

Earth's Drink had been blocked by the explosion and had found a new way over the barrier before plunging down again into the bowels of the world. The one sky-flung leap it made as its weight burst down a mountain wall was enough to blot out Khinjan forever, and what had been a dry, mile-wide moat was a shallow lake with death's rick and rubbish floating on the surface.

The earth rocked. King was up on his feet in a second and faced about. The Rangar laughed.

"So ends the 'Heart of the Hills!'" he said. "Think kindly of her, sahib. She thought well enough of you!"

He laughed again and sprang on the black mare, and before King could speak or raise a hand to stop him he was off at wondrous speed along the precipice in the direction of the Khyber pass and India. Two of the men who had come out of Khinjan mounted and spurred after him.

King collected his men and the women and children. It was easy, for they were numb from what they had witnessed and dazed by fear. In half an hour he had them mustered and marching.

CHAPTER XXIII.

They reached the Khyber famished and were fed at All Masjid fort, after King had given a certain password and had whispered to the officer commanding. But he did not change into European clothes yet, and none of his following suspected him of being an Englishman.

"A Rangar on a black mare has gone down the pass ahead of you in a hurry," they told him at All Masjid. "He had two men with him and food enough. Only stopped long enough to make his business known."

"What did he say his business is?" asked King.
"He gave a sign and said a word that satisfied us on that point!"

"Oh!" said King. "Can you signal down the pass?"
"Surely."
"Courtenay at Jamrud?"

"Yes. In charge there and growing tired of doing nothing."
"Signal down and ask him to have that bath ready for me that I spoke about. Goodbye."

So he left All Masjid at the head of a motley procession that grew noisier and more confident every hour. Ismail began to grow more lively and to have a good many orders to fling to the rest.

"You mourn like a dog," King told him. "Three bowls and a whine and a little sulking—and then forgetfulness!"

Ismail looked nasty at that but did not answer, although he seemed to have a hot word ready. And thenceforward he hung his head more, and at least tried to seem benevolent. But his manner was unconvincing none the less, and King found it food for thought.

The ex-soldiers and would-be soldiers marched in four behind him, growing hourly more like drilled men, and talking, with each stride that brought them nearer India, more as men do who have an interest in law and order. Behind them tramped the women from Khinjan, carrying their babies and their husbands' loads; and behind them again were the other women, who had been told they would be overtaken in the Khyber, but who had actually had to run themselves raw-footed in order to catch up.

Down the Khyber have come conquerors, a dozen conquering kings, and as many beaten armies; but surely no stranger host than this ever trudged between the echoing walls. The very eagles screamed at them. Signals preceded them, and Courtenay himself rode up the pass to greet them. At Jamrud they were given food and their rifles were taken away from them and a guard was set to watch them. But the guard only consisted of two men, both of whom were Pathans, and they

assured them that, ridiculous though it sounded, the British were actually willing to forgive their enemies and to pardon all deserters who applied for pardon on condition of good faith in the future.

That they prayed to Allah like little children lost and found. The women crooned love-songs to their babies over the clear fires and the men talked—and talked—and talked until the stars grew big as moons to weary eyes and they slept at last, to dream of khaki uniforms and karnal sahibs who knew neither fear nor favor and who said things that were so. It is a mad world to the Himalayan hillman where men in authority tell truth unadorned without shame and without consideration—a mad, mad world, and perhaps too exotic to be wholesome, but pleasant while the dream lasts.

Over in the fort Courtenay placed a bath at King's disposal and lent him clean clothes and a razor. But he was not very cordial.

"Tell me all the war news!" said King, splashing in the tub. And Courtenay told him, passing him another cake of soap when the first was finished. After all, there was not much to tell—butchery in Belgium—Huns and guns—and the everlastingly glorious stand that saved Paris and France and Europe.

"According to the cables our men are going the records one better. I think that's all," said Courtenay.

"Then why the stiffness?" asked King. "Why am I talked to at the end of a tube, so to speak?"
"You're under arrest!" said Courtenay.

"The deuce I am!"
"I'm taking care of you myself to obviate the necessity of putting a sentry on guard over you."

"Good of you, I'm sure. What's it all about?"
"I don't mind telling you, but I'd rather you'd wait. The minute you were sighted word was wired down to headquarters, and the general himself will be up here by train any minute."

"Very well," said King. "Got a cigar? Got a black one? Blacker the better!"

He was out of his bath and remembered that minute that he had not smoked a cigar since leaving India. Naked, shaved, with some of the stain removed, he did not look like a man in trouble as he filled his lungs with the salt-peterish smoke of a fat Trichinopoly.

And then the general came and did not wait for King to get dressed but burst into the bathroom and shook hands with him while he was still naked and asked ten questions (like a galling gun) while King was getting on his trousers, divining each answer after the third word and waving the rest aside.

"And why am I arrested, sir?" asked King the moment he could slip the question in edgewise.
"Oh, yes, of course. Try the case here as well as anywhere. What does this mean?"

Out of his pocket the general produced a letter that smelt strongly of a scent King recognized. He spread it out on a table, and King read. It was Yasmini's letter that she had sent down the Khyber to make India too hot to hold him.

"Too bad about your brother," said the general. "The body is buried. How much is true about the head?"
King told him.
"Where's she?" asked the general.
King did not answer. The general waited.

"I don't know, sir."
"Ask the Rangar," Courtenay suggested.
"Where is he?" asked King.
"Caught him coming down the Khyber on his black mare and arrested him. He's in the next room! I hope he's to be hanged. So that I can buy the mare," he added cheerfully.

King whistled softly to himself, and the general looked at him through half-closed eyes.
"Go in and talk to him, King. Let me know the result."

He had picked King to go up the Khyber on that errand not for nothing. He knew King and he knew the symptoms. Without answering him King obeyed. He went out of the room into a dark corridor and rapped on the door of the next room to the right. There was a muffled answer from within. Courtenay shouted something to the sentry outside the door and he called another man, who fitted a key in the lock. King walked into a room in which one lamp was burning and the door slammed shut behind him.

He was in there an hour, and it never did transpire just what passed, for he can hold his tongue on any subject like a clam, and the general, if anything, can go him one better. Courtenay was placed under orders not to talk, so those who say they know exactly what happened in the room between the time when the door was shut on King and the time when he knocked to have it opened and called for the general, are not telling the truth.

What is known is that finally the general hurried through the door and ejaculated, "Well, I'm d—d!" before he could close it again. The sentry (Punjab Mussulman) has sworn to that over a dozen campfires since the day.

As it is known, too, for the sentry has taken oath on it and has told the story so many times without much variation that no one who knows the man's record doubts any longer—it is known that when the door opened again King and the general walked out with the Rangar between them. And the Rangar had no turban on, but carried it unwound in his hand. And his golden hair fell nearly to his knees and changed his whole appearance. And he was weeping. And he

was not a Rangar at all, but She, and how anybody can ever have mistaken her for a man, even in man's clothes and with her skin darkened, was beyond the sentry's power to guess. He for one, etc. . . . But nobody believed that part of his tale.

As Yussuf bin Ali said over the campfire up the Khyber later on, "When she sets out to disguise herself, she is what she will be, and he who says he thinks otherwise has two tongues and no conscience!"

What is surely true is that the four of them—Yasmini, the general, Courtenay and King—sat up all night in a room in the fort, talking together, while a succession of sentries overstrained their ears endeavoring to hear through keyholes. And the sentries heard nothing and invented very much.

But Partan Singh, the Sikh, who carried in bread and cocoa to them at about five the next morning, and found them still talking, heard King say, "So, in my opinion, sir, there'll be no jihad in these parts. There'll be sporadic raids, of course, but nothing a brigade can't deal with. The heart of the holy war's torn out and thrown away."

"Very well," said the general. "You can go up the Khyber again and join your regiment."

But by that time the Rangar's turban was on again and the tears were dry, and it was Partan Singh who

threw most doubt on the sentry's tale about the golden hair. But, as the sentry said, no doubt Partan Singh was jealous.

There is no doubt whatever that the general went back to Peshawar in the train at eight o'clock and that the Rangar went with him in a separate compartment with about a dozen hillmen chosen from among those who had come down with King.

And it is certain that before they went King had a talk with the Rangar in a room alone, of which conversation, however, the sentry reported afterward that he did not overhear one word; and he had to go to the doctor with a cold in his ear at that. He said he was nearly sure he heard weeping. But on the other hand, those who saw both of them come out were certain that both were smiling.

It is quite certain that Athelstan King went up the Khyber again, for the official records say so, and they never lie, especially in time of war. He rode a coal-black mare, and Courtenay called him "Chikki"—a "lifter."

Some say the Rangar went to Delhi. Some say Yasmini is in Delhi. Some say no. But it is quite certain that before he started up the Khyber King showed Courtenay a great gold bracelet that he had under his sleeve. Five men saw him do it.

And if that was really Rewa Gunga in the general's train, why was the general so painfully polite to him? And why did Ismail insist on riding in the train, instead of accepting King's offer to go up the Khyber with him?

One thing is very certain. King was right about the jihad. There has been none in spite of all Turkey's and Germany's efforts. There have been sporadic raids, much as usual, but nothing one brigade could not easily deal with, the press to the contrary notwithstanding.

King of the Khyber rifles is now a major, for you can see that by turning up the army list.

But if you wish to know just what transpired in the room in Jamrud Fort while the general and Courtenay waited, you must ask King—if you dare; for only he knows, and one other. It is not likely you can find the other.

But it is likely that you may hear from both of them again, for "A woman and intrigue are one!" as India says. The war seems long, and the world is large, and the chances for intrigues are almost infinite, given such combination as King and Yasmini and a love affair.

And as King says on occasion: "Kuch dar nahin hai! There is no such thing as fear!" Another one might say, "The roof's the limit!"

And bear in mind, for this is important: King wrote to Yasmini a letter, in Urdu from the mullah's cave, in which he as good as gave her his word of honor to be her "loyal servant" should she choose to return to her allegiance. He is no splitter of hairs, no quibbler. His word is good on the darkest night or wherever he casts a shadow in the sun.

"A man and his promise—a woman and intrigue—are one!"

(THE END.)

Invented Cherokee Alphabet. Sequoyah, inventor of the Cherokee alphabet, was one of the great men of the Indian race. He was a half-breed, whose English name was George Guess. His father was a white man and his mother a full-blood Indian woman.



He Said He Was Nearly Sure He Heard Weeping.