

# King of the Khyber Rifles

By  
**Talbot Mundy**  
Copyright by the Bobbs-Merrill Company

## A Story That Combines the Thrill of Modern Detective Fiction With the Romance of Arabian Nights Tales

### ADVENTURE AND ROMANCE EXTRAORDINARY

In this remarkable tale Mr. Mundy introduces us to the mysteries and charm of India, and to an interesting people of the Orient about whom the western world knows little or nothing. In the company of Captain Athelstan King, his hero, we go on a wonderful journey in Khyber caves; and with him we meet Yasmini, an exotic beauty of marvellous fascination. It gives us great pleasure to publish "King of the Khyber Rifles" because we believe our readers will enjoy the serial more than any we have printed in a long time.

THE EDITOR.

### CHAPTER I.

The men who govern India—more power to them and her!—are few. Those who stand in their way and pretend to help them with a flood of words are a host. The charge has been the light in print that India—well-spring of plague and sudden death and money lenders—has sold her soul to twenty succeeding conquerors in turn.

So when the world war broke the world was destined to be surprised on India's account. The Red sea, full of racing transports crowded with dark-skinned gentlemen, whose one prayer was that the war might not be over before they should have struck a blow for Britain, was the Indian army's answer to the press.

More than one nation was deeply shocked by India's answer to "practices" that had extended over years. But there were men in India who learned to love India long ago with that love that casts out fear, who knew exactly what was going to happen and could therefore afford to wait for orders instead of running round in rings.

Athelstan King, for instance, nothing yet but a captain unattached, sat in messagerly furnished quarters with his heels on a table. He is not a doctor, yet he read a book on surgery; and when he went over to the club he carried the book under his arm and continued to read it there. In the other room where the telegraph blinks were littered in confusion all about the floor, the other officers sent telegrams and forgot King, who sat and smoked and read about surgery; and before he had nearly finished one box of cheroots a general at Peshawar wiped a bald red skull and sent him an urgent telegram.

"Come at once!" it said simply. King was at Lahore, but miles don't matter when the dogs of war are loosed. The right man goes to the right place at the exact right time then, and the fool goes to the wall. In that one respect war is better than some kinds of peace.

In the train on the way to Peshawar he was not troubled by forced conversation. Consequently he reached Peshawar comfortable, in spite of the heat. And his genial manner of saluting the full-general who met him with a dogcart at Peshawar station was something scandalous. Full-generals, particularly in the early days of war,

do not drive to the station to meet captains very often; yet King climbed into the dogcart unexcitedly, after keeping the general waiting while he checked a trunk!

The general cracked his whip without any other comment than a smile. A blood mare tore sparks out of the macadam, and a dusty military road began to ribbon out between the wheels. Sentries in unexpected places announced themselves with a ring of shaken steels as their rifles came to the "present," which courtesies the general noticed with a raised whip. On the dogcart's high front seat, staring straight ahead of him between the horse's ears, King listened. The general did nearly all the talking.

"The North's the danger," King grunted with the lids half-lowered over full, dark eyes. He did not look especially handsome in that attitude. Some men swear he looks like a Roman, and others liken him to a gargoyle, all of them choosing to ignore the smile that can transform his whole face instantly.

"We're denading India of troops—"

stant the general's fat figure darkened the doorway twenty men of higher rank than King, native and English, rose from lined-up chairs and pressed forward.

"Sorry—have to keep you all waiting—busy!" He waved them aside with a little apologetic gesture. "Come in here, King."

King followed him through a door that slammed tight behind him on rubber jambs.

"Sit down!" The general unlocked a steel drawer and began to rummage among the papers in it. In a minute he produced a package, bound in rubber bands, with a faded photograph face upward on the top.

"That's the woman! How d'you like the look of her?" King took the package and for a minute stared hard at the likeness of a woman whose fame has traveled up and down India, until her witchery has become a proverb. She was

not keeping back more than a mere handful to hold the tribes in check." King nodded. There has never been peace along the northwest border. It did not need vision to foresee trouble from that quarter. In fact it must have been partly on the strength of some of King's reports that the general was planning now.

"Well, the tribes'll know presently how many men we're sending overseas. There've been rumors about Khyber by the hundred lately. They're cooking something. Can you imagine 'em keeping quiet now?"

"That depends, sir. Yes, I can imagine it." The general laughed. "That's why I sent for you. I need a man with imagination! There's a woman you've got to work with on this occasion who can imagine a shade or two too much. What's worse, she's ambitious. So I chose you to work with her."

King's lips stiffened under his moustache, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled into crow's feet to correspond. Eyes are never coal-black, of course, but his looked it at that minute.

"You know we've sent men to Khyber who are said to have entered the caves. Not one of 'em has ever returned." King frowned.

"She claims she can enter the caves and come out again at pleasure. She has offered to do it, and I have accepted. Can you guess who she is?" "Not Yasmini!" King hazarded, and the general nodded. The helmet-strap mark, printed indelibly on King's jaw and cheek by the Indian sun, tightened and grew whiter—as the general noted out of the corner of his eye.

"Know her?" "Know of her, of course, sir. Everybody does. Never met her to my knowledge."

"Um-m-m! Whose fault was that? Somebody ought to have seen to that. Go to Delhi now and meet her. I'll send her a wire to say you're coming. She knows I've chosen you. She tried to insist on full discretion, but I overruled her."

King's tongue licked his lips, and his eyes wrinkled. The general's voice became the least shade more authoritative.

"When you see her, get a pass from her that'll take you into Khyber caves! Ask her for it! For the sake of appearances I'll gazette you seconded to the Khyber rifles. For the sake of success, get a pass from her!" "Very well, sir."

"You've a brother in the Khyber rifles, haven't you? Was it you or your brother who visited Khyber once and sent in a report?" "I did, sir."

He spoke without pride. Even the brigade of British-Indian cavalry that went to Khyber on the strength of his report and leveled its defenses with the ground, had not been able to find the famous caves. Yet the caves themselves are a byword.

"There's talk of a jihad (holy war). There's worse than that! When you went to Khyber, what was your chief object?"

"To find the source of the everlasting rumors about the so-called 'Heart of the Hills,' sir."

"Yes, yes, I remember. I read your report. You didn't find anything, did you? Well, the story is now that the 'Heart of the Hills' has come to life. So the spies say."

King whistled softly. "There's no guessing what it means," said the general. "Go and work with Yasmini. The spies keep bringing in rumors of ten thousand men in Khyber caves, and of another large lashkar not far away from Khyber. There must be no jihad, King! India is all but defenseless! This story about a 'Heart of the Hills' coming to life may presage unity of action and a holy war such as the world has not seen. Go up there and stop it if you can. At least, let me know the facts."

King grunted. To stop a holy war single handed would be rather like stopping the wind—possibly easy enough, if one knew the way. Yet he knew no general would throw away a man like himself on a useless venture. He began to look happy.

The general clucked to the mare and one wheel ceased to touch the gravel as they whirled along a semi-circular drive. Under the porch of a pretentious residence, sentries saluted, the sails swung down and in less than sixty seconds King was following the general through a wide entrance into a crowded hall. The in-

stant the general's fat figure darkened the doorway twenty men of higher rank than King, native and English, rose from lined-up chairs and pressed forward.

"Sorry—have to keep you all waiting—busy!" He waved them aside with a little apologetic gesture. "Come in here, King."

King followed him through a door that slammed tight behind him on rubber jambs.

"Sit down!" The general unlocked a steel drawer and began to rummage among the papers in it. In a minute he produced a package, bound in rubber bands, with a faded photograph face upward on the top.

"That's the woman! How d'you like the look of her?" King took the package and for a minute stared hard at the likeness of a woman whose fame has traveled up and down India, until her witchery has become a proverb. She was

not keeping back more than a mere handful to hold the tribes in check." King nodded. There has never been peace along the northwest border. It did not need vision to foresee trouble from that quarter. In fact it must have been partly on the strength of some of King's reports that the general was planning now.

"Well, the tribes'll know presently how many men we're sending overseas. There've been rumors about Khyber by the hundred lately. They're cooking something. Can you imagine 'em keeping quiet now?"

"That depends, sir. Yes, I can imagine it." The general laughed. "That's why I sent for you. I need a man with imagination! There's a woman you've got to work with on this occasion who can imagine a shade or two too much. What's worse, she's ambitious. So I chose you to work with her."

King's lips stiffened under his moustache, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled into crow's feet to correspond. Eyes are never coal-black, of course, but his looked it at that minute.

"You know we've sent men to Khyber who are said to have entered the caves. Not one of 'em has ever returned." King frowned.

"She claims she can enter the caves and come out again at pleasure. She has offered to do it, and I have accepted. Can you guess who she is?" "Not Yasmini!" King hazarded, and the general nodded. The helmet-strap mark, printed indelibly on King's jaw and cheek by the Indian sun, tightened and grew whiter—as the general noted out of the corner of his eye.

"Know her?" "Know of her, of course, sir. Everybody does. Never met her to my knowledge."

"Um-m-m! Whose fault was that? Somebody ought to have seen to that. Go to Delhi now and meet her. I'll send her a wire to say you're coming. She knows I've chosen you. She tried to insist on full discretion, but I overruled her."

King's tongue licked his lips, and his eyes wrinkled. The general's voice became the least shade more authoritative.

"When you see her, get a pass from her that'll take you into Khyber caves! Ask her for it! For the sake of appearances I'll gazette you seconded to the Khyber rifles. For the sake of success, get a pass from her!" "Very well, sir."

"You've a brother in the Khyber rifles, haven't you? Was it you or your brother who visited Khyber once and sent in a report?" "I did, sir."

He spoke without pride. Even the brigade of British-Indian cavalry that went to Khyber on the strength of his report and leveled its defenses with the ground, had not been able to find the famous caves. Yet the caves themselves are a byword.

"There's talk of a jihad (holy war). There's worse than that! When you went to Khyber, what was your chief object?"

"To find the source of the everlasting rumors about the so-called 'Heart of the Hills,' sir."

"Yes, yes, I remember. I read your report. You didn't find anything, did you? Well, the story is now that the 'Heart of the Hills' has come to life. So the spies say."

King whistled softly. "There's no guessing what it means," said the general. "Go and work with Yasmini. The spies keep bringing in rumors of ten thousand men in Khyber caves, and of another large lashkar not far away from Khyber. There must be no jihad, King! India is all but defenseless! This story about a 'Heart of the Hills' coming to life may presage unity of action and a holy war such as the world has not seen. Go up there and stop it if you can. At least, let me know the facts."

King grunted. To stop a holy war single handed would be rather like stopping the wind—possibly easy enough, if one knew the way. Yet he knew no general would throw away a man like himself on a useless venture. He began to look happy.

The general clucked to the mare and one wheel ceased to touch the gravel as they whirled along a semi-circular drive. Under the porch of a pretentious residence, sentries saluted, the sails swung down and in less than sixty seconds King was following the general through a wide entrance into a crowded hall. The in-

stant the general's fat figure darkened the doorway twenty men of higher rank than King, native and English, rose from lined-up chairs and pressed forward.

"Sorry—have to keep you all waiting—busy!" He waved them aside with a little apologetic gesture. "Come in here, King."

King followed him through a door that slammed tight behind him on rubber jambs.

"Sit down!" The general unlocked a steel drawer and began to rummage among the papers in it. In a minute he produced a package, bound in rubber bands, with a faded photograph face upward on the top.

"That's the woman! How d'you like the look of her?" King took the package and for a minute stared hard at the likeness of a woman whose fame has traveled up and down India, until her witchery has become a proverb. She was

not keeping back more than a mere handful to hold the tribes in check." King nodded. There has never been peace along the northwest border. It did not need vision to foresee trouble from that quarter. In fact it must have been partly on the strength of some of King's reports that the general was planning now.

"Well, the tribes'll know presently how many men we're sending overseas. There've been rumors about Khyber by the hundred lately. They're cooking something. Can you imagine 'em keeping quiet now?"

"That depends, sir. Yes, I can imagine it." The general laughed. "That's why I sent for you. I need a man with imagination! There's a woman you've got to work with on this occasion who can imagine a shade or two too much. What's worse, she's ambitious. So I chose you to work with her."

King's lips stiffened under his moustache, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled into crow's feet to correspond. Eyes are never coal-black, of course, but his looked it at that minute.

"You know we've sent men to Khyber who are said to have entered the caves. Not one of 'em has ever returned." King frowned.

"She claims she can enter the caves and come out again at pleasure. She has offered to do it, and I have accepted. Can you guess who she is?" "Not Yasmini!" King hazarded, and the general nodded. The helmet-strap mark, printed indelibly on King's jaw and cheek by the Indian sun, tightened and grew whiter—as the general noted out of the corner of his eye.

"Know her?" "Know of her, of course, sir. Everybody does. Never met her to my knowledge."

"Um-m-m! Whose fault was that? Somebody ought to have seen to that. Go to Delhi now and meet her. I'll send her a wire to say you're coming. She knows I've chosen you. She tried to insist on full discretion, but I overruled her."

King's tongue licked his lips, and his eyes wrinkled. The general's voice became the least shade more authoritative.

"When you see her, get a pass from her that'll take you into Khyber caves! Ask her for it! For the sake of appearances I'll gazette you seconded to the Khyber rifles. For the sake of success, get a pass from her!" "Very well, sir."

"You've a brother in the Khyber rifles, haven't you? Was it you or your brother who visited Khyber once and sent in a report?" "I did, sir."

He spoke without pride. Even the brigade of British-Indian cavalry that went to Khyber on the strength of his report and leveled its defenses with the ground, had not been able to find the famous caves. Yet the caves themselves are a byword.

"There's talk of a jihad (holy war). There's worse than that! When you went to Khyber, what was your chief object?"

"To find the source of the everlasting rumors about the so-called 'Heart of the Hills,' sir."

"Yes, yes, I remember. I read your report. You didn't find anything, did you? Well, the story is now that the 'Heart of the Hills' has come to life. So the spies say."

King whistled softly. "There's no guessing what it means," said the general. "Go and work with Yasmini. The spies keep bringing in rumors of ten thousand men in Khyber caves, and of another large lashkar not far away from Khyber. There must be no jihad, King! India is all but defenseless! This story about a 'Heart of the Hills' coming to life may presage unity of action and a holy war such as the world has not seen. Go up there and stop it if you can. At least, let me know the facts."

King grunted. To stop a holy war single handed would be rather like stopping the wind—possibly easy enough, if one knew the way. Yet he knew no general would throw away a man like himself on a useless venture. He began to look happy.

The general clucked to the mare and one wheel ceased to touch the gravel as they whirled along a semi-circular drive. Under the porch of a pretentious residence, sentries saluted, the sails swung down and in less than sixty seconds King was following the general through a wide entrance into a crowded hall. The in-

stant the general's fat figure darkened the doorway twenty men of higher rank than King, native and English, rose from lined-up chairs and pressed forward.

"Sorry—have to keep you all waiting—busy!" He waved them aside with a little apologetic gesture. "Come in here, King."

King followed him through a door that slammed tight behind him on rubber jambs.

"Sit down!" The general unlocked a steel drawer and began to rummage among the papers in it. In a minute he produced a package, bound in rubber bands, with a faded photograph face upward on the top.

"That's the woman! How d'you like the look of her?" King took the package and for a minute stared hard at the likeness of a woman whose fame has traveled up and down India, until her witchery has become a proverb. She was

not keeping back more than a mere handful to hold the tribes in check." King nodded. There has never been peace along the northwest border. It did not need vision to foresee trouble from that quarter. In fact it must have been partly on the strength of some of King's reports that the general was planning now.



"That's the Woman! How Do You Like the Look of Her?"



He Feigned Sleep So Successfully That the Native Turned Away at Last.

"Thought so!" He dared open his eyes a mite wider. "He's pukka—true to type! Rob first and then kill!"

As he watched, the thief drew the sheet back from Hyde's face, with strained fingers that could have taken spectacles from the victim's nose without his knowledge. Then as fish glide in and out among the reeds without touching them, swift and soft and unseen, his fingers searched Hyde's body. They found nothing.

King moved in his sleep, rather noisily, and the movement knocked a book to the floor from the foot of his berth. The noise of that awake Hyde, and King pretended to begin to wake, yawning and rolling on his back (that being much the safest position an unarmed man can take and much the most awkward for his enemy).

"Thieves!" Hyde yelled at the top of his lungs, groping wildly for his pistol and not finding it.

King sat up and rubbed his eyes. The native drew the knife, and—believing himself in command of the situation—hesitated for one priceless second. He saw his error and darted for the door too late. With a movement unbelievably swift King was there ahead of him; and with another movement not so swift, but much more disconcerting, he threw his sheet as the reticulus used to throw a net in ancient Rome. It wrapped round the native's head and arms, and the two went together to the floor in a twisted stranglehold.

In another half-minute the native was groaning, for King had his knife-wrist in two hands and was bending it backward while he pressed the man's stomach with his knees.

The knife fell to the floor, and the thief made a gallant effort to recover it, but King was too strong for him. He seized the knife himself, slipped it in his own bosom and resumed his hold before the native guessed what he was after. The train screamed itself to a standstill at a wayside station, and a man with a lantern began to chant the station's name. The instant the train's motion altogether ceased the heat shut in on them as if the lid of Tophet had been slammed. The prickly heat burst out all over Hyde's skin and King's too.

There was plenty of excuse for relaxing hold, and King made full use of it. A second later he gave a very good pretense of pain in his finger ends as the thief burst free. The native made a dive at his bosom for the knife, but he frustrated that. Then he made a prodigious effort, just too late, to clutch the man again, and he did succeed in tearing loose a piece of shirt; but the fleeing robber must have wondered, as he bolted into the blacker shadows of the station building, why such an iron-fingered, wide-awake sahib should have made such a truly feeble showing at the end.

"Hang it!—couldn't you hold him? Were you afraid of him, or what?" demanded Hyde, beginning to dress himself. Instead of answering, King leaned out into the lamp-lit gloom, and in a minute he caught sight of a sergeant of native infantry passing down the train. He made a sign that brought the man to him on the run.

"Did you see that runaway?" he asked.

"Ha, sahib. I saw one running. Shall I follow?"

"No. This piece of his shirt will identify him. Take it. Hide it! When a man with a torn shirt, into which that piece fits, makes for the telegraph office after this train has gone on, see that he is allowed to send any telegrams he wants to! Only, have copies of every one of them wired to Captain King, care of the stationmaster, Delhi. Have you understood?"

"Ha, sahib."

"Grab him, and lock him up tight afterward—but not until he has sent his telegrams!"

He Feigned Sleep So Successfully That the Native Turned Away at Last.

without making another sound of any kind. King's ears are part of the equipment for his exacting business, but he could not hear the door click shut again.

He Feigned Sleep So Successfully That the Native Turned Away at Last.

For about five minutes, while the train swayed headlong into Indian darkness, the man stood listening and watching King's face. He stood so near that King recognized him for the one who had accosted him on Rawal-Pindi platform. And he could see the outline of the knife-hilt that the man's fingers clutched underneath his shirt. He feigned sleep so successfully that the native turned away at last.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)