

King of the Khyber Rifles

A Thrilling Story of German Intrigue Among the Fierce Hillmen of India During the War

By Talbot Mundy

Copyright by the Bobbs-Merrill Company

KING WITNESSES THE FASCINATING DANCE OF A DUSKY BEAUTY—BY RESISTING HER CHARMS HE OUTWITS ONE WHO WOULD GLADLY SEE HIM DEAD

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 Yasmin, 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 foils a plan to assassinate him and gets evidence that Yasmin is after him.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

Within ten minutes Hyde was asleep, snoring prodigiously. Then King pulled out the knife again and studied it for half an hour. The blade was of bronze, with an edge hammered to the keenness of a razor. The hilt was of nearly pure gold, in the form of a woman dancing. The whole thing was so exquisitely wrought that age had only softened the lines, without in the least impairing them. It looked like one of those Grecian toys with which Roman women of Nero's day stabbed their lovers. But that was not why he began to whistle very softly to himself.

Presently he drew out the general's package of papers, with the photograph on the top. He stood up, to hold both knife and papers close to the light in the room.

It needed no great stretch of imagination to suggest a likeness between the woman of the photograph and the other, of the golden knife-hilt. And nobody, looking at him then, would have dared suggest he lacked imagination.

If the knife had not been so ancient they might have been portraits of the same woman, in the same disguise, taken at the same time.

"She knew I had been chosen to work with her. The general sent her word that I am coming," he muttered to himself. "There must have been a spy watching at Peshawar, who wired to Rawal-Pindi for this man to jump the train and go on with the job. Why should she give the man a knife with her own portrait on it? Is she queen of a secret society? Well—we shall see!"

He lay back with his head on the pillow, and before five minutes more had gone he was asleep. His mobile face in repose looked Roman, for the sun had tanned his skin and his nose was aquiline. In museums, where sculptured heads of Roman generals and emperors stand around the wall on pedestals, it would not be difficult to pick several that bore more than a faint resemblance to him. He had breadth and depth of forehead and a fowl that lent itself to smiles as well as sternness, and a throat that expressed manly determination in every molded line.

He slept like a boy until dawn; and he and Hyde had scarcely exchanged another dozen words when the train screamed next day into Delhi station. Then he saluted stiffly and was gone.

CHAPTER III.

Delhi boasts a round half-dozen railway stations, all of them designed with regard to war, so that to King there was nothing unexpected in the fact that the train had brought him to an unexpected station. He plunged into its crowd much as a man in the mood might plunge into a whirlpool. The station screamed echoed, reverberated, hummed. At one minute the whole building shook to the thunder of a grinning regiment; an instant later it clattered to the wrought-steel hammer of a thousand hoofs, as led troopers danced into formation to invade the waiting trucks. Soldiers of nearly every Indian military caste stood about everywhere. Down the back of each platform Tommy Atkins stood in long straight lines, talking or munching great sandwiches or smoking.

Threading his way in and out among the motley swarm with a great black cheroot between his teeth and sweat running into his eyes from his helmet-band, Athelstan King strode at ease—at home—intent—amused—awake—and almost awfully happy. He was not in the least less happy because perfectly aware that a native was following him at a distance, although he did wonder how the native had contrived to pass within the lines. At the end of fifteen minutes there was not a glib staff officer there who could have deceived him as to the numbers and destination of the force entraining.

"Kerach!" he told himself, chewing the butt of his cigar and keeping well ahead of the shadowing native. He did not have to return salutes, because he did not look for them. Very few people noticed him at all, although he was recognized once or twice by former messmates. At his leisure—in his own way, that was devious and like a string of miracles—he filtered toward the telegraph office. The native who had followed him all this time drew closer, but he did not let himself be troubled by that.

He whispered proof of his identity to the telegraph clerk, who was a Royal

engineer, new to that job that morning, and a sealed telegram was handed to him at once. Because it was wartime, and the censor had closed on India like a throttling string, it was not in code. So the Mirza Ali, of the Fort, Bombay, to whom it was addressed, could be expected to read between the lines.

Cattle intended for slaughter, dispatched Bombay on fourteen down. Meet train. Will be inspected en route, but should be dealt with carefully on arrival. Cattle inclined to stampede owing to bad scare received north of Delhi. Take all precautions and notify Abdul.

"Good!" he chuckled. "Let's hope we get Abdul too. I wonder who he is!"

Still uninterested in the man who shadowed him, he walked back to the office window and wrote two telegrams; one to Bombay, ordering the arrest of All Mirza of the Fort, with an urgent admonition to discover who his man Abdul might be, and to seize him as soon as found; the other to the station in the north, insisting on close confinement for Suliman.

That being all the urgent business, he turned leisurely to face his shadow, and the native met his eyes with the engaging frankness of an old friend, coming forward with outstretched hand. They did not shake hands, but the man made a signal with his fingers that is known to not more than a dozen men in all the world, and that changed the situation altogether.

"Walk with me," said King, and the man fell into stride beside him.

He was a Rangar—which is to say a Rajput who, or whose ancestors had turned Mohammedan. Like many Rajputs he was not a big man, but he looked fit and wiry; his head scarcely came above the level of King's chin, although his turban distracted attention from the fact. The turban was of silk and unusually large.

The whitest of well-kept teeth, gleaming regularly under a little black waxed mustache betrayed no trace of betelnut or other nastiness. King was not so sure that the eyes were brown, and he changed his opinion about their color a dozen times within the hour. Once he would even have sworn they were green.

The man was a regular Rangar dandy, of the type that can be seen playing polo almost any day at Mount Abu—that gets into mischief with a grace due to practice and heredity—



"I Have a Message for You."

but that does not manage its estates too well, as a rule, nor pay its debts in a hurry.

"My name is Rewa Gunga," he said in a low voice. "I have a message for you."

"From whom?"

"From her!" said the Rangar, and without exactly knowing why, or being pleased with himself, King felt excited.

They were walking toward the station exit. King had a trunk check in his hand, but returned it to his pocket, not proposing just yet to let the Rangar overhear instructions regarding the trunk's destination; he was too good-looking and too overbrimming

with personal charm to be trusted thus early in the game. Besides, there was that captured knife, that hilted at the end of a tenuous thread, that secret sign as well as loot have been stolen before now.

"I'd like to walk through the streets and read the crowd."

He smiled as he said that, knowing well that the average young Rajput of good birth would rather fight a tiger with cold steel than walk a mile or two. He drew fire at once.

"Why walk, King sahib? Are we animals? There is a carriage waiting—her carriage—and a coachman whose ears were born dead. We might be overheard in the street. Are you and I children, tossing stones into a pool to watch the rings widen?"

"Lend on, then," answered King. Outside the station was a luxurious modern victoria, with C springs and rubber tires, with horses that would have done credit to a vicerey. The Rangar motioned King to get in first, and the moment they were both seated the Rajput coachman set the horses to going like the wind. Rewa Gunga opened a jeweled cigarette case.

"Will you have one?" he asked with the air of royalty entertaining a blood-equal.

King accepted a cigarette for politeness' sake and took occasion to admire the man's slender wrist, that was doubtless hard and strong as woven steel, but was not much more than half the thickness of his own. One of the questions that occurred to King that minute was why this well-bred youngster whose age he guessed at twenty-two or so had not turned his attention to the army.

"My height!"

The man had read his thoughts! "Not quite tall enough. Besides—you are a soldier, are you not? And do you fight?" Then, after a minute of rather strained silence: "My message is from her."

"From Yasmin?"

"Who else?"

King accepted the rebuke with a little inclination of the head. He spoke as little as possible, because he was puzzled. He had become conscious of a puzzled look in the Rangar's eyes and it only added to his problem if the Rangar found in him something inexplicable. The West can only get the better of the East when the East is too cock-sure.

"She has jolly well gone North!" said the Rangar suddenly, and King shut his teeth with a snap. He sat bolt upright, and the Rangar allowed himself to look amused.

"She has often heard of you," he said.

"I've heard of her," said King. "Of course! Who has not? She has desired to meet you, sahib, ever since she was told you are the best man in your service."

King grunted, thinking of the knife beneath his shirt. Again it was as if the Rangar read a part of his thoughts, if not all of them. It is not difficult to counter that trick, but to do it a man must be on his guard, or the East will know what he has thought and what he is going to think, as many have discovered when it was too late.

"Her men are able to protect anybody's life from any God's number of assassins, whatever may lead you to think the contrary. From now forward your life is in her men's keeping!"

"Very good of her, I'm sure," King murmured. He was thinking of the general's express order to apply for a "passport" that would take him into Khinjan caves—mentally cursing the necessity for asking any kind of favor—and wondering whether to ask this man for it or wait until he should meet Yasmin. The Rangar answered his thoughts again as if he had spoken them aloud.

"She left this with me, saying I am to give it to you! I am to say that wherever you wear it, between here and Afghanistan, your life shall be safe and you may come and go!"

King stared. The Rangar drew a bracelet from an inner pocket and held it out. It was a wonderful barbaric thing of pure gold, big enough for a grown man's wrist, and old enough to have been hammered out in the very womb of time. It looked almost like ancient Greek, and it fastened with a hinge and clasp that looked as if they did not belong to it and might have been made by a not very skillful modern jeweler.

"Won't you wear it?" asked Rewa Gunga, watching him. "It will prove a true talisman! What was the name of the Johnny who had a lamp to rub? Aladdin? It will be better than what he had! He could only command a lot of bogies. This will give you authority over flesh and blood! Take it, sahib!"

So King put it on, letting it slip up his sleeve out of sight—with a sensation as the snap closed of putting handcuffs on himself. But the Rangar looked relieved.

"That is your passport, sahib! Show it to a hillman whenever you suppose yourself in danger. The Raj might go to pieces, but while Yasmin lives—"

"Her friends will boast about her, I suppose!"

King finished the sentence for him because it is not considered good form

for natives to hint at possible dissolution of the Anglo-Indian government. Everybody knows that the British will not govern India forever, but the British—who know it best of all, and work to that end most fervently—are the only ones encouraged to talk about it.

For a few minutes after that Rewa Gunga held his peace, while the carriage swayed at breakneck speed through the swarming streets. King, watching and saying nothing, did not believe for a second the lame explanation Yasmin had left behind. She must have some good reason for wishing to be first up the Khyber, and he was very sorry indeed she had slipped away. It might be only jealousy, yet why should she be jealous?

It was the next remark of the Rangar's that set him entirely on his guard, and thenceforward whoever could have read his thoughts would have been more than human. He had known of that thought-reading trick ever since his ayah (native nurse) taught him to Hsp Hindustanee; just as surely he knew that his impudent use was intended to sap his belief in himself.

"I'll bet you a hundred dabs," said the Rangar, "that she decided to be there first and get control of the situation! She's slippery, and quick, and like all women, she's jealous!"

The Rangar's eyes were on his, but King was not to be caught again. It is quite easy to think behind a fence, so to speak, if one gives attention to it.

"She will be busy presently fooling those Afridis," he continued, waving his cigarette. "She has fooled them always, to the limit of their bally bent. Yasmin plays her own game, for amusement and power—a good game—a deep game! You have seen already how India has to ask her aid in the 'Hills'! She loves power, power, power—not for its name, for names are nothing, but to use it."

"How long have you known her?" asked King.

The Rangar eyed him sharply. "A long time. She and I played together when we were children. It is because she knows me very well that she chose me to travel North with you, when you start to find her in the 'Hills'!"

King cleared his throat, and the Rangar nodded, looking into his eyes with the engaging confidence of a child who never has been refused anything, in or out of reason. King made no effort to look pleased.

Just then the coachman took a last corner at a gallop and drew the horses up on their haunches at a door in a high white wall. Rewa Gunga sprang out of the carriage before the horses were quite at a standstill.

"Here we are!" he said, and King noticed that the street curved here so that no other door and no window overlooked this one.

He followed the Rangar, and he was no sooner into the shadow of the door than the coachman lashed the horses and the carriage swung out of view.

"This way," said the Rangar over his shoulder. "Come!"

CHAPTER IV.

It was a musty smelling entrance, so dark that to see was scarcely possible after the hot glare outside. Dimly King made out Rewa Gunga mounting stairs to the left and followed him. When he guessed himself two stories at least above road level, there was a sudden blaze of reflected light and he blinked at more mirrors than he could count. Curtains were reflected in each mirror, and little glowing lamps, so cunningly arranged that it was not possible to guess which were real and which were not. King stood still.

Then suddenly, as if she had done it a thousand times before and surprised a thousand people, a little nut-brown maid parted the middle pair of curtains and said "Salaam!" smiling with teeth that were as white as porcelain. King looked scarcely interested and not at all disturbed.

Rewa Gunga hurried past him, thrusting the little maid aside, and led the way. King followed him into a long room, whose walls were hung with richer silks than any he remembered to have seen. In a great wide window to one side some twenty women began at once to make flute music. Silken punkahs swung from chains, wafting back and forth a cloud of sandal-wood smoke that veiled the whole scene in mysterious, scented mist.

"Be welcome!" laughed Rewa Gunga; "I am to do the honors, since she is not here. Be seated, sahib."

King chose a divan at the room's farthest end, near tall curtains that led into rooms beyond. He turned his back toward the reason for his choice. On a little ivory-inlaid ebony table about ten feet away lay a knife, that was almost the exact duplicate of the one inside his shirt. He could sense hushed expectancy on every side—could feel the eyes of many women fixed on him—and began to draw on his guard as a fighting man draws on armor. There and then he deliberately set himself to resist mesmerism, which is the East's chief weapon.

Rewa Gunga, perfectly at home,

sprawled leisurely along a cushioned couch with a grace that the West has not learned yet; but King did not make the mistake of trusting him any better for his easy manners, and his eyes sought swiftly for some unorthodox, unplanned thing on which to rest, that he might save himself by a sort of mental leverage.

Glancing along the wall that faced the big window, he noticed for the first time a huge Afridi, who sat on a stool and leaned back against the silken hangings with arms folded.

"Who is that man?" he asked.

"He? Oh, he is a savage—just a big savage," said Rewa Gunga, looking vaguely annoyed.

"Why is he here?"

He did not dare let go of this chance side issue. He knew that Rewa Gunga wished him to talk to Yasmin and to ask questions about her, and that if he succumbed to that temptation all his self-control would be cunningly sapped away from him until his secrets, and his very senses, belonged to some one else.

"What is he doing here?" he insisted.

"He? Oh, he does nothing. He waits," purred the Rangar. "He is to be your body-servant on your journey to the North. He is nothing—nobody at all!—except that he is to be trusted utterly because he loves Yasmin. He is obedient! A big obedient fool! Let him be!"

"No," said King. "If he's to be my man I'll speak to him!"

He felt himself winning. Already the spell of the room was lifting, and he no longer felt the cloud of sandalwood like a veil across his brain.

"Won't you tell him to come here to me?"

Rewa Gunga laughed, resting his silk turban against the wall hangings and clasping both hands about his knee. It was as a man might laugh who has been touched in a bout with folly.

"Oh!—Ismael!" he called, with a voice like a bell, that made King stare.

The Afridi seemed to come out of a deep sleep and looked bewildered, rubbing his eyes and feeling whether his turban was on straight. He combed his beard with nervous fingers as he gazed about him and caught Rewa Gunga's eye. Then he sprang to his feet.

"Come!" ordered Rewa Gunga. The man obeyed.

"Did you see?" Rewa Gunga chuckled. "He rose from his place like a buffalo, rump first and then shoulder after shoulder! Such men are safe! Such men have no guile beyond what will help them to obey! Such men think too slowly to invent deceit for their own sake!"

The Afridi came and towered above them, standing with gnarled hands knotted into clubs.

"What is thy name?" King asked him.

"Ismael!" he boomed.

"Thou art to be my servant?"

"Aye! So said she. I am her man. I obey!"

"When did she say so?" King asked him blandly. The hillman stroked his great beard and stood considering the question. King entered a shrewd suspicion that he was not so stupid as he chose to seem. His eyes were too hawk-bright to be a stupid man's.

"Before she went away," he answered at last.

"When did she go away?"

He thought again, then "Yesterday," he said.

"Why did you wait before you answered?"

The Afridi's eyes furtively sought Rewa Gunga's and found no aid there. Watching the Rangar less furtively, but even less obviously, King was aware that his eyes were nearly closed, as if they were not interested. The fingers that clasped his knee drummed on it indifferently, seeing which King allowed himself to smile.

"Never mind," he told Ismael. "It is no matter. It is ever well to think twice before speaking once, for thus mistakes die stillborn. Only the monkey-folk thrive on quick answers—do they not? Thou art a man of many inches—of teeth and sinew—hey, but thou art a man! If the heart within those great ribs of thine is true as thine arms are strong I shall be fortunate to have thee for a servant!"

"Aye!" said the Afridi. "But what are words? She has said I am thy servant, and to hear her is to obey!"

Now he chose to notice the knife on the ebony table as if he had not seen it before. He got up and reached for it and brought it back, turning it over and over in his hand.

"A strange knife," he said.

"Yes—from Khinjan," said Rewa Gunga, and King eyed him as one wolf eyes another.

"What makes you say it is from Khinjan?"

"She brought it from Khinjan caves herself! There is another knife that matches it, but that is not here. That bracelet you now wear, sahib, is from Khinjan caves too! She has the secret of the caves!"

"I have heard that the 'Heart of the Hills' is there," King answered. "Is the 'Heart of the Hills' a treasure house?"

Rewa Gunga laughed.

"Ask her, sahib! Perhaps she will tell you! Who knows? She is a woman of resource and unexpectedness—let her women dance for you a while."

King nodded. Then he got up and laid the knife back on the little table. A minute or so later he noticed that at a sign from Rewa Gunga a woman left the great window place and spirited the knife away.

"May I have a sheet of paper?" he asked, for he knew that another fight for his self-command was due.

Rewa Gunga gave an order, and a maid brought scented paper on a silver tray. He drew out his own fountain pen, and since his one object was to give his brain employment, he wrote down a list of the names he had memorized in the train on the journey from Peshawar, not thinking of a use for the list until he had finished. Then, though, a real use occurred to him.

While he began to write more than a dozen dancing women swept into the room from behind the silk hangings in a concerted movement that was all like slumberous grace. Wood-wind music called to them from the great



The Afridi Came and Towered Above Them.

deep window. They began to chant, still dreamily, and with the chant the dance began, in and out, round and round, lazily, ever so lazily, wreathed in buoyant gossamer that was scarcely more solid than the sandalwood smoke they wafted into rings.

King watched them and listened to their chant until he began to recognize the strain on the eye muscles that precedes the mesmeric spell. Then he wrote and read what he had written and wrote again.

"What have you written?" asked a quiet voice at his ear; and he turned to look straight in the eyes of Rewa Gunga, who had leaned forward to read over his shoulder. Just for one second he hovered on the brink of quick defeat. Having escaped the Scylla of the dancing women, Charybdis waited for him in the shape of eyes that were pools of hot mystery. It was the sound of his own voice that brought him back to the world again and saved his will for him unbound.

"Read it, won't you?" he laughed. "If you know, take this pen and mark the names of whichever of those men are still in Delhi."

Rewa Gunga took pen and paper and set a mark against some thirty of the names, for King had a manner that disarmed refusal.

King began to watch the dance again, for it did not feel safe to look too long into the Rangar's eyes. It was not wise just then to look too long at anything or to think too long on any one subject.

"Ismael is slow about returning," said the Rangar.

"I wrote at the foot of the tar," said King, "that they are to detain him there until the answer comes."

King tricks the Rangar and rescues some of Yasmin's cut-throats, whom he takes north with him as grateful body-guards.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Famous Family of Preachers.

Rev. Lyman Beecher, sometimes referred to as "founder of the Beecher family," had seven sons who were preachers. Beginning with the oldest, they were: William Henry Beecher, born in 1802; Edward Beecher, born in 1803; George Beecher, born in 1809; Henry Ward Beecher, born in 1813; Charles Beecher, born in 1815; Thomas K. Beecher, born in 1824, and James C. Beecher, born in 1828.