

King of the Khyber Rifles

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

By Talbot Mundy

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KING FACES THE BIGGEST ADVENTURE OF HIS CAREER SO FAR WHEN HE COMES TO THE ENTRANCE OF KHINJAN CAVES AND PROVES HIMSELF A MURDERER.

Synopsis.—At the beginning of the world war Capt. Athelstan King of the British Indian army and of its secret service, is ordered to Delhi to meet Yasmini, a dancer, and go with her to Kinjan 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 foils a plan to assassinate him and gets evidence that Yasmini is after him. He meets Rewa Gunga, Yasmini's man, who says she has already gone north, and at her town house witnesses queer dances. Ismail, an Afridi, becomes his body servant and protector. He rescues some of Yasmini's hillmen and takes them north with him, tricking the Rangar into going ahead. The Rangar 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.

CHAPTER X.

Even with the man with the stomach ache mounted on the spare horse for the sake of extra speed (and he was not suffering one-fifth so much as he pretended); with Ismail to urge, and King to coax, and the fear of mountain death on every side of them, they were the part of a night and a day and a night and a part of another day in reaching Khinjan.

At night and at noon they slept fitfully at the chance-met shrine of some holy man. The "Hills" are full of them, marked by fluttering rags that can be seen for miles away; and though the Quran's meaning must be stretched to find excuse, and hillmen are adept at stretching things and hold those shrines as sacred as the book itself. Men who would almost rather cut throats than gamble regard them as sanctuaries. So a man may rest in temporary peace even on the road to Khinjan, although Khinjan and peace have nothing whatever in common.

It was at such a shrine, surrounded by tattered rags tied to sticks, that Ismail drew Ismail into conversation, and deftly forced on him the role of questioner.

"How can't thou see the caves!" he asked, for King had hinted at his intention; and for answer King gave him a glimpse of the gold bracelet.

"Aye! Well and good! But even she dare not disobey the rule. Khinjan was there before she came, and the rule was there from the beginning, when the first men found the caves! Some—hundreds—have gained admission, lacking the right. But who ever saw them again? Allah! I, for one, would not chance it!"

"Then and I are two men!" answered King. "I shall see the caves."

"Aye! But listen! How many Indian servants of the British Raj have set out to see the caves? Many, many—aye, very many! Some, having got by Khinjan, entered the caves. None ever came out again!"

"Then, what is my case to thee?" King asked him. "If I cannot come out



"Who Are You?" Howled a Human Being, Whose Voice Was So Like a Wolf's That the Words at First Had No Meaning.

again and there is a secret, then the secret will be kept, and what is the trouble?"

"I love thee," the Afridi answered simply. "Thou art a man after mine own heart. Turn! Go back before it is too late!"

King shook his head.

"I was in Khinjan once before, my friend! I know the rule! I failed to reach the caves that other time because I had no witnesses to swear they had seen me slay a man in the teeth of written law. I know!"

"Who saw thee this time?" Ismail asked, and began to cackle with the cruel humor of the "Hills," that sees amusement in a man's undoing, or in the destruction of his plans. "Be warned and go back!"

"Come with me, then."

"Nay, I am her man. She waits for me!"

"I imagine she waits for me!" laughed King. "Forward! We have rested in this place long enough!"

It was ten of a blazing forenoon, and the sun had heated up the rocks until it was pain to walk on them and agony to sit, when they topped the last escarpment and came in sight of Khinjan's walls, across a mile-wide rock ravine—Khinjan the unregenerate, that has no other human habitation within a march because none dare build.

It was midday when at last they stood on bottom and swayed like men in a dream fingering their bruises and scarcely able for the heat haze to see the tangled mass of stone towers and mud-and-stone walls that faced them, a mile away. They were nearly across the valley, hunting for shadow where none was to be found, when a shot salute brought them up all-standing in a cluster. Six or eight nickel-coated bullets splattered on the rocks close by, and one so narrowly missed King that he could feel its wind.

Up went all their hands together, and they held them so until they ached. Nothing whatever happened. Their arms ceased aching and grew numb.

They advanced another two hundred yards and another volley rattled among the rocks on either hand, frightening one of the mules so that it stumbled and fell and had to be helped up again. When that was done, and the mule stood trembling, they all faced the wall. But they were too weary to hold their hands up any more. Thirst had begun to exercise its sway. One of the men was half delirious.

"Who are ye?" howled a human being, whose voice was so like a wolf's that the words at first had no meaning. He peered over the parapet, a hundred feet above, with his head so swathed in dirty linen that he looked like a bandaged corpse.

"What will ye? Who comes uninvited into Khinjan?"

King bethought him of Yasmini's talisman. He held it up, and the gold band glinted in the sun. Yet, although a Hillman's eyes are keener than an eagle's, he did not believe the thing could be recognized at that angle, and from that distance. Another thought suggested itself to him. He turned his head and caught Ismail in the act of signalling with both hands.

"Ye may come!" howled the watchman on the parapet, disappearing instantly.

King trembled—perhaps as a race-horse trembles at the starting gate, though he was weary enough to tremble from fatigue. But that passed. He was all in hand when he led his men up over a rough stone causeway to a door in the bottom of a high battlemented wall and waited for somebody to open it.

The great teak door looked as if it had been stolen from some Hindu temple, and he wondered how and when they could have brought it there across those savage intervening miles. High above the door was a ledge of rock that crossed like a bridge from wall to wall, with a parapet of stone built upon it, pierced for rifle-fire.

As they approached a Rangar turban, not unlike King's own, appeared above the parapet on the ledge and a voice he recognized hailed him good-humoredly.

"Salaam alekoum!"

"And upon thee be peace!" King answered in the Pashtu tongue, for the "Hills" are polite, whatever the other principles.

Rewa Gunga's face beamed down on him, wreathed in smiles that seemed to include mockery as well as triumph. Looking up at him at an angle that made his neck ache and dazzled his eyes, King could not be sure, but it seemed to him that the smile said, "Here you are, my man, and aren't you in for it?" He more than half suspected he was intended to understand that. But the Rangar's conversation took another line.

"By jove!" he chuckled. "She expected you. She guessed you are a bounder who can't but well on a dry scent, and she dared bet you will come in spite of all odds! But she didn't

expect you in Rangar dress! No, by jove! You jolly well will take the wind out of her sails!"

King made no answer. For one thing, the word "bounder," even in English, is not essentially a compliment. But he had a better reason than that.

"Did you find the way easily?" the Rangar asked; but King kept silence.

"Is he parched? Have they cut his tongue out on the road?"

That question was in Pashtu, directed at Ismail and the others, but King answered it.

"Oh, as for that," he said, salaaming again in the fastidious manner of a native gentleman, "I know no other tongue than Pashtu and my own Rasthani. My name is Kurram Khan. I ask admittance."

He held up his wrist to show the gold bracelet, and high over his head the Rangar laughed like a bell.

"Shabash!" he laughed. "Well done! Enter, Kurram Khan, and be welcome, thou and thy men. Be welcome in her name!"

Somebody pulled a rope and the door yawned wide, giving on a kind of courtyard whose high walls allowed no view of anything but not blue sky. Through a gap under an arch in a far corner of the courtyard came a one-eyed, lean-looking villain in Afridi dress who leaned on a long gun and stared at them under his hand. After a leisurely consideration of them he rubbed his nose slowly with one finger, spat contemptuously, and then used the finger to beckon them, crooking it queerly and turning on his heel. He did not say one word.

King led the way after him on foot, for even in the "Hills" where cruelty is a virtue, a man may be excused, on economic grounds, for showing mercy to his beast. His men tugged the weary animals along behind him, through the gap under the arch and along an almost interminable, smelly maze of alleys whose sides were the walls of square stone towers, or sometimes of mud-and-stone-walled compounds, and here and there of sheer, slab-sided cliff. Like Old Jerusalem, the place could have contained a civil war of a hundred factions, and still have opposed stout resistance to an outside army.

Alley gave on to courtyard, and filthy square to alley, until unexpectedly at last a seemingly blind passage turned sharply and opened on a straight street, of fair width, and more than half a mile long. It is marked "Street of the Dwellings" on the secret army maps, and it has been burned so often by Khinjan rioters, as well as by expeditions out of India, that a man who goes on a long journey never expects to find it the same on his return.

It was lined on either hand with motley dwellings, out of which a motley crowd of people swarmed to stare at King and his men. There were Hindus—sycophants, keepers of accounts and writers to the chiefs (since literacy is at a premium in these parts). In proof of Khinjan's catholic taste and indiscriminate villainy, there were women of nearly every Indian breed and caste, many of them stolen into shameful slavery, but some of them there from choice. And there were little children—little naked brats with round drum tummies, who squealed and shrilled and stared with bold eyes.

Perhaps a thousand souls came out to watch, all told. Not an eye of them all missed the government marks on King's trappings, or the government brand on the mules, and after a minute or two, when the procession was half-way down the street, a man reproved a child who had thrown a stone, and he was backed up by the others. They classified King correctly, exactly as he meant they should. As a hakim—a man of medicine—he could fill a long-felt want; but by the brand on his accoutrements he walked an openly avowed robber, and that made him a brother in crime. Somebody cuffed the next child who picked up a stone.

He knew the street of old, although it had changed perhaps a dozen times since he had seen it. It was a cul-de-sac, and at the end of it, just as on his previous visit, there stood a stone mosque, whose roof leaned back at a steep angle against the mountainside. It was a famous mosque in its way, for the bed sheet of the Prophet is known to hang in it, preserved against the ravages of time and the touch of infidels by priceless Afghan rugs before and behind, so that it hangs like a great thin sandwich between the rear stone wall. King had seen it.

Toward the mosque the one-eyed ruffian led the way, with the long, leisurely-seeming gait of a mountaineer. At the door, in the middle of the end of the street, he paused and struck on the lintel three times with his gun butt. And that was a strange proceeding, to say the least, in a land where the mosque is public resting place for homeless ones, and all the "faithful" have a right to enter.

A mullah, shaven like a mummy for some unaccountable reason—even his eyebrows and eyelashes had been removed—pushed his bare head through the door and blinked at them. There was some whispering and more star-

ing, and at last the mullah turned his back.

The door slammed. The one-eyed guide grounded his gun-butt on the stone, and the procession waited, watched by the crowd that had lost its interest sufficiently to talk and joke.

In two minutes the mullah returned and threw a mat over the threshold. It turned out to be the end of a long narrow strip that he kicked and unrolled in front of him all across the floor of the mosque. After that it was not so astonishing that the horses and mules were allowed to enter.

"Which proves I was right after all!" murmured King to himself.

In a steel box at Simla is a memorandum, made after his former visit to the place, to the effect that the entrance into Khinjan caves might possibly be inside the mosque. No-

body had believed it likely, and he had not more than half favored it himself; but it is good, even when the next step may lead into a death-trap, to see one's first opinions confirmed.

He nodded to himself as the outer door slammed shut behind them, for that was another most unusual circumstance.

A faint light shone through slitlike windows, changing darkness into gloom, and little more than vaguely hinting at the Prophet's bed sheet. But for a section of white wall to either side of it, the relic might have seemed part of the shadows. The mullah stood with his back to it and beckoned King nearer. He approached until he could see the pattern on the covering rugs, and the pink rins round the mullah's lashed eyes.

"What is thy desire?" the mullah asked—as a wolf might ask what a lamb wants.

"Audience with her!" King answered, and showed the gold bracelet on his wrist.

The red eye-rims of the mullah blinked a time or two, and though he did not salute the bracelet, as others had invariably done, his manner underwent a perceptible change.

"That is proof that she knows thee. What is thy name?"

"Kurram Khan, hakim."

"We need thee in Khinjan caves! But none enter who have not earned right to enter! There is but one key. Name it!"

King drew in his breath. He had hoped Yasmini's talisman would prove to be key enough. The nails of his left hand nearly pierced the palm, but he smiled pleasantly.

"He who would enter must slay a man before witnesses in the teeth of written law!" he said.

"And thou?"

"I slew an Englishman!" The boast made his blood run cold, but his expression was one of sinful pride.

"Whom? When? Where?"

"Athelstan King—a British arfirer—sent on his way to these 'Hills' to spy!"

It was like having spells cast on himself to order!

"Where is his body?"

"Ask the vultures! Ask the kites!"

"And thy witnesses?"

Hoping against hope, King turned and waved his hand. As he did so, being quick-eyed, he saw Ismail drive an elbow home into Darya Khan's ribs, and caught a quick interchange of whispers.

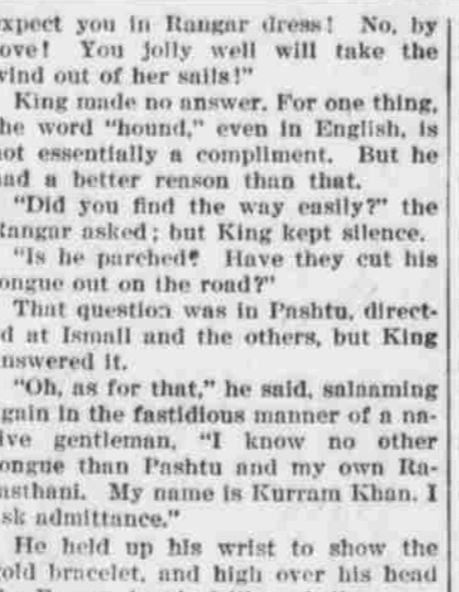
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"Then enter!" said the priest resignedly, as one who admits a communicant against his better judgment.

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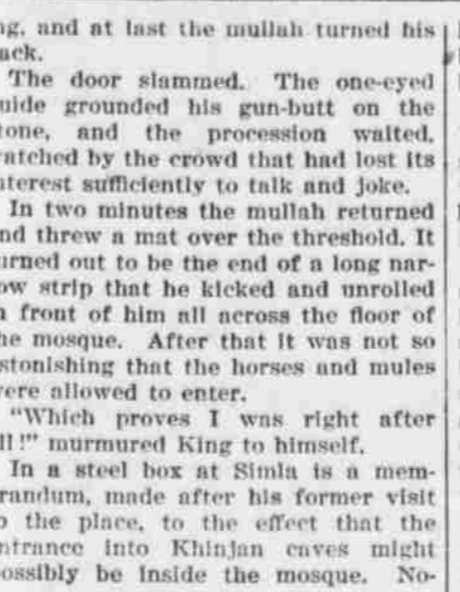
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A faint light shone through slitlike windows, changing darkness into gloom, and little more than vaguely hinting at the Prophet's bed sheet. But for a section of white wall to either side of it, the relic might have seemed part of the shadows. The mullah stood with his back to it and beckoned King nearer. He approached until he could see the pattern on the covering rugs, and the pink rins round the mullah's lashed eyes.

"What is thy desire?" the mullah asked—as a wolf might ask what a lamb wants.

"Audience with her!" King answered, and showed the gold bracelet on his wrist.

The red eye-rims of the mullah blinked a time or two, and though he did not salute the bracelet, as others had invariably done, his manner underwent a perceptible change.

"That is proof that she knows thee. What is thy name?"

"Kurram Khan, hakim."

"We need thee in Khinjan caves! But none enter who have not earned right to enter! There is but one key. Name it!"

King drew in his breath. He had hoped Yasmini's talisman would prove to be key enough. The nails of his left hand nearly pierced the palm, but he smiled pleasantly.

"He who would enter must slay a man before witnesses in the teeth of written law!" he said.

"And thou?"

"I slew an Englishman!" The boast made his blood run cold, but his expression was one of sinful pride.

"Whom? When? Where?"

"Athelstan King—a British arfirer—sent on his way to these 'Hills' to spy!"

It was like having spells cast on himself to order!

"Where is his body?"

"Ask the vultures! Ask the kites!"

"And thy witnesses?"

Hoping against hope, King turned and waved his hand. As he did so, being quick-eyed, he saw Ismail drive an elbow home into Darya Khan's ribs, and caught a quick interchange of whispers.

"These men are all known to me," said the mullah. "They have right to enter here. They have right to testify. Did ye see him slay his man?"

"Aye!" lied Ismail, prompt as friend can be.

"Aye!" lied Darya Khan, fearful of Ismail's elbow.

"Then enter!" said the priest resignedly, as one who admits a communicant against his better judgment.

He turned his back on them so as to face the Prophet's bed sheet and the rear wall, and in that minute a

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