

King of the Khyber Rifles

A Romance of Adventure

By TALBOT MUNDY

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

Synopsis.—At the beginning of the world war Capt. Athelstan King of the British Indian army and of its secret service, is ordered to Delhi to meet Yasmini, a dancer, and goes with her to Khinjan to meet the outlaws there who are said by spies to be preparing for a jihad or holy war. On his way to Delhi King quietly follows a plan to assassinate him and gets evidence that Yasmini is after him. He meets Rewa Gunga, Yasmini's man, who says she has already gone north, and at her town house witnesses queer dances. Ismail, an Afridi, becomes his body servant and protector. He rescues some of Yasmini's hillmen and takes them north with him, tricking the Rangar into going ahead. The Rangar deserts him at a dangerous time. He meets his brother at Ali Masjid fort. The disguise he assumes there fools even the sharp-eyed cutthroats composing his guard. He enters Khinjan caves, thanks to his lying guides, and at a clinic hears of an impending revolt led by Bull-with-a-Beard, and goes to a meeting in the cavern.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

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

"Money?" said King. "And should no more money come?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"God is great!" the mullah howled. The crowd thundered in echo to him; and then the vault took up the echoes. "And Muhammad is his prophet!" howled the mullah. Instantly they answered him again. "His prophet—is his prophet—is his prophet!" said the stalactites, in loud barks—then in murmur—then in awe-struck whispers.

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

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

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

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