

King of the Khyber Rifles

By TALBOT MUNDY

The Most Picturesque Romance of the Decade

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CHAPTER XIV—Continued.

Rewa Gunga spoke truth in Delhi when he assured King he should some day wonder at Yasmini's dancing.

She became joy and bravery and youth! She danced a story for them of the things they knew. She was the dawn light, touching the distant peaks. She was the wind that follows it, sweeping among the junipers and kissing each as she came. She was laughter, as the little children laugh when the cattle are loosed from the byres at last to feed in the valleys. She was the scent of spring uprising. She was blossom. She was fruit! Very daughter of the sparkle of warm sun on snow, she was the "Heart of the Hills" herself!

Never was such dancing! Never such an audience! Never such mad applause! She danced until the great rough guards had to run round the arena with clubbed butts and beat back trespassers who would have mobbed her. And every movement—every cautious wonder-curve and step with which she told her tale was as purely Greek as the handle on King's knife and the figures on the lamp-bowls and as the bracelets on her arm. Greek!

And she half-modern Russian, ex-girl-wife of a semi-civilized hill rajah! Who taught her? There is nothing new, even in Khinjan, in the "Hills!"

And when the crowd defeated the arena guards at last and burst through the swinging butts to seize her and find her high and worship her with mad barbaric rite, she ran toward the shield. The four men raised it shoulder high again. She went to it like a leaf in the wind—sprang on it as if wings had lifted her, scarce touching it with naked toes—and leapt to the bridge with a laugh.

She went over the bridge on tiptoes, like nothing else under heaven but Yasmini at her bewitchingest. And without pausing on the far side she flung up the heavy stone stairs, dived into the dark hole and was gone!

"Come!" yelled Ismail in King's ear. He could have heard nothing less, for the cavern was like to burst apart from the tumult.

"Whither?" the Afridi shouted in disgust. "Does the wind ask whither? Come like the wind and see! They will remember next that they have a bone to pick with thee! Come away!"

That seemed good enough advice. He followed as fast as Ismail could shoulder a way out between the frantic hill-men, deafened, stupefied, numbed, almost covered by the ovation they were giving the "Heart of their Hills."

CHAPTER XV.

As they disappeared after a scramble through the mouth of the same tunnel they had entered by, a roar went up behind them like the birth of earthquakes. Looking back over his shoulder, King saw Yasmini come back into the hole's mouth, to stand framed in it and bow acknowledgment. For the space of five minutes she stood in the



Never Was Such Dancing.

great hole, smiling and watching the crowd below. Then she went, and the guards began to loose random volleys at the roof and brought down hundredweights of splintered stalactite.

Within a minute there were a hundred men busy sweeping up the splinters. In another minute twenty Zakka Chels had begun a sword dance, yelling like demons. A hundred joined them. In three minutes more the whole arena was a dining whirlpool, and the river's voice was drowned in shouting and the stamping of naked feet on stone.

"Come!" urged Ismail, and led the way. King's last impression was of earth's

womb on fire and of hellions brewing wrath. The stalactites and the hurrying river multiplied the dancing lights into a million, and the great roof hurled the din down again to make confusion with the new din coming up.

Ismail went like a rat down a run, and it became so dark that King had to follow by ear. He imagined they were running back toward the ledge under the waterfall; yet, when Ismail called a halt at last, panting, groped behind a great rock for a lamp and lit the wick with a common safety match, they were in a cave he had never seen before.

"Where are we?" King asked. "Where none dare seek us. Art thou afraid?" asked Ismail, holding the lamp to King's face.

"Kuch dar nahin hai!" he answered. "There is no such thing as fear!"

Suddenly the Afridi blew the lamp out, and then the darkness became so thick that thought itself left less than a yard away.

"Ismail!" he whispered. But Ismail did not answer him.

He faced about, leaning against the rock, with the flat of both hands pressed tight against it for the sake of its company; and almost at once he saw a little bright red light glowing in the distance. It might have been below him; it was perfectly impossible to judge, for the darkness was not measurable.

"Flowers—turn to the light!" droned Ismail's voice above sentimentally, and turning, he thought he could see red eyes peering over the rock. He jumped, and made a grab for the flowing beard that surely must be below them, but he missed.

"Little fish swim to the light!" droned Ismail. "Moths fly to the light! Who is a man that he should know less than they?"

He turned again and stared at the light. Dimly, very vaguely he could make out that a causeway led downward from almost where he stood. He was convinced that should he try to climb back Ismail would merely reach out a hand and shove him down again, and there was no sense in being put to that indignity. He decided to go forward, for there was even less sense in standing still. So he stooped to feel the floor with his hand before deciding to go forward. There was no mistaking the finish given by the tread of countless feet. He was on a highway, and there are not often pitfalls where so many feet have been.

For all that he went forward as a certain Agaz once did, and it was many minutes before he could see a certain glowing blood-red in the light behind two lamps, at the top of a flight of ten stone steps. When he went quite close he saw carpet down the middle of the steps, so ancient that the stone showed through in places; all the pattern, supposing it ever had any, was worn or faded away. Carpet and steps glowed red too. His own face, and the hands he held in front of him were red-hot-poker color. Yet outside the little ellipse of light the darkness looked like a thing to lean against, and the silence was so intense that he could hear the arteries singing by his ears.

He saw the curtains move slightly, apparently in a little puff of wind that made the lamps waver. Then he walked up the steps and at the top he stooped to examine the lamps.

They were bronze, cast, polished and graven. All round the circumference of each bowl were figures in half-relief, representing a woman dancing. She was the woman of the knife-hilt, and of the lamps in the arena! But no two figures of the dance were alike. It was the same woman dancing, but the artist had chosen twenty different poses with which to immortalize his skill, and hers. Both lamps burned sweet oil with a wick, and each had a chimney of horn, not at all unlike a modern lamp chimney. The horn was stained red.

As he set the second lamp down he became aware of a subtle, interesting smell, and memory took him back at once to Yasmini's room in the Chandni Chowk in Delhi where he had smelled it first. It was the peculiar scent he had been told was Yasmini's own—a blend of scents, like a chord of music, in which musk did not predominate.

He took three strides and touched the curtains, discovering now for the first time that there were two of them, divided down the middle. They were of leather, and though they looked old as the "Hills" themselves, the leather was supple as good cloth.

"Kurram Khan hai!" he announced. But the echo was the only answer. There was no sound beyond the curtains. With his heart in his mouth he parted them with both hands, startled by the sharp jangle of metal rings on a rod.

So he stood, with arms outstretched, staring—staring—staring—with eyes skilled swiftly to take in details, but with a brain that tried to explain—formed a hundred wild suggestions—and then reeled. He was face to face with the unexplainable—the riddle of Khinjan caves.

The leather curtains slipped through his fingers and closed behind him with

the clash of rings on a rod. But he was beyond being startled. He was not really sure he was in the world. He was not certain whether it was the twentieth century, or 55 B. C., or earlier yet; or whether time had ceased.

The place where he did not look like a cave, but a palace chamber, for the rock walls had been trimmed square and polished smooth; then they had been painted pure white, except for a wide blue frieze, with a line of gold leaf drawn underneath it. And on the frieze, done in gold-leaf too, was the Grecian lady of the lamps, always dancing. There were fifty or sixty figures of her, no two alike.

A dozen lamps were burning, set in niches cut in the walls at measured intervals. They were exactly like the two outside, except that their horn chimneys were stained yellow instead of red, suffusing everything in a golden glow.

Opposite him was a curtain, rather like that through which he had entered. Near to the curtain was a bed, whose great wooden posts were cracked with age. In spite of its age it was spread with fine, new linen.



On It, Above the Linen, a Man and a Woman Lay Hand in Hand.

Richly embroidered, not very ancient Indian draperies hung down from it to the floor on either side. On it, above the linen, a man and a woman lay hand in hand, and the woman was so exactly like Yasmini, even to her clothing and her naked feet, that it was not possible for a man to be self-possessed.

They both seemed asleep. It was minutes before he satisfied himself that the man's breast did not rise and fall under the bronze Roman armor and that the woman's jeweled gauzy stuff was still. Imagination played such tricks with him that in the stillness he imagined he heard breathing.

After he was sure they were both dead, he went nearer, but it was a minute yet before he knew the woman was not she. At first a wild thought possessed him that she had killed herself.

The only thing to show who he had been were the letters S. P. Q. R. on a great plumed helmet, on a little table by the bed. But she was the woman of the lamp-bowls and the frieze. A life-size stone statue in a corner was so like her, and like Yasmini too, that it was difficult to decide which of the two it represented.

She had lived when he did, for her fingers were locked in his. And he had lived two thousand years ago, because his armor was about as old as that, and for proof that he had died in it part of his breast had turned to powder inside the breastplate. The rest of his body was whole and perfectly preserved.

Stern, handsome in a high-beaked Roman way, gray on the temples, firm-lipped, he lay like an emperor in harness. But the pride and resolution on his face were outdone by the serenity of hers. Very surely those two had been lovers.

Both of them looked young and healthy—the woman younger than thirty—twenty-five at a guess—and the man perhaps forty, perhaps forty-five. Every stitch of the man's clothing had decayed, so that his armor rested on the naked skin, except for a dressed leather kilt about his middle. The leather was as old as the curtains at the entrance, and as well preserved. But the woman's silked clothing was as new as the bedding. Yet, they both died about the same time, or how could their fingers have been interlaced? And some of the jewelry on the woman's clothes was very ancient as well as priceless.

He looked closer at the fingers for signs of force and suddenly caught his breath. Under the woman's filmy sleeve was a wrought gold bracelet, smaller than that one he himself had worn in Delhi and up the Khyber. He raised the loose sleeve to look more closely at it, and the movement laid

bare another bracelet, on the man's right wrist. Size for size, this was the same as the one that had been stolen from himself.

Memory prompted him. He felt its outer edge with a finger nail. There was the little nick that he had made in the soft gold when he struck it against the cell bars in the jail at the Mir Khan palace! He touched the gold. It was warm. He repeated the test on the woman's wrists. Hers were warm, too. Both bracelets had been worn by a living being within an hour—

He muttered and frowned in thought, and then suddenly jumped backward. The leather curtain near the bed had moved on its bronze rod.

"Aren't they dear?" a voice said in English behind him. "Aren't they sweet?"

Yasmini stood not two arms' lengths away, lovelier than the dead woman because of the merry life in her, young and warm, aglow, but looking like the dead woman and the woman of the frieze—the woman of the lamp-bowls—the statue—come to life, speaking to him in English more sweetly than if it had been her mother tongue. The English abuse their language. Yasmini caressed it and made it do its work twice over.

Being dressed as a native, he saluted low. Knowing him for what he was, she gave him the sennastained tips of her warm fingers to kiss, and he thought she trembled when he touched them. But a second later she had snatched them away and was treating him to rallery.

"Man of pills and blisters!" she said, "tell me how those bodies are preserved! Spill knowledge from that learned skull of thine!"

He did not answer. He never shone in conversation at any time, having made as many friends as enemies by saying nothing until the spirit moves him. But she did not know that yet.

"If I knew for certain why those two did not turn to worms," she went on, "almost I would choose to die now, while I am beautiful! What would they say, think you, King sahib, if they found us two dead beside those two? Speak, man, speak! Has Khinjan struck you dumb?"

But he did not speak. He was staring at her arm, where two whitish marks on the skin betrayed that bracelets had been.

"Oh, those! They are thers. I would not rob the dead, or the gods would turn on me. I robbed you, instead, while you slept. Fie, King sahib, while you slept!"

But her steel did not strike on flint. It was her eyes that flashed. He would have done better to have seemed ashamed, for then he might have fooled her, at least for a while. But having judged himself, he did not care a fig for her judgment of him. She realized that instantly and having found a tool that would not work, discarded it for a better one. She grew confidential.

"I borrow them," she explained, "but I put them back. I take them for so many days, and when the day comes—the gods like us to be exact! You were near death when I took the bracelet last night. The time was up! I would have stabbed you if you had tried to prevent me!"

Now he spoke at last and gave her a first glimpse of an angle of his mind she had not suspected.

"Princess," he said. He used the word with the deference some men can combine with effrontery, so that very tenderness has bars. "You might have had that thing back if you had sent a messenger for it at any time. A word by a servant would have been enough."

"You could never have reached Khinjan then!" she retorted. Her eyes flashed again, but his did not waver.

"Princess," he said, "why speak of what you don't know?"

He thought she would strike like a snake, but she smiled at him instead. And when Yasmini has smiled on a man he has never been just the same man afterward. He knows more, for one thing. He has had a lesson in one of the finer arts.

"I will speak of what I do know," she said. "No, there is no need. Look! Look!"

She pointed at the bed—at the man on the bed—fingers locked in those of a woman who looked so like herself.

He looked, knowing well there was something to be understood, that stared him in the face. But for the life of him he could not determine question or answer.

"What is in your bosom?" she asked him.

He put his hand to his shirt. "Draw it out!" she said, as a teacher drills a child.

He drew out the gold-hilted knife with the bronze blade, with which a man had meant to murder him. He let it lie on the palm of his hand and looked from it to her and back again. The hilt might have been a portrait of her modeled from the life.

"Here is another like it," she said, stepping to the bedside. She drew back the woman's dress at the bosom and showed a knife exactly like that in

King's hand. "One lay on her bosom and one on his when I found them!" she said. "Now, think again!"

He did think, of thirty thousand possibilities, and of one impossible idea that stood out prominent among them all and insisted on seeming the only likely one.

"I saw the knife in your bosom last night," she said, "and laughed so that I nearly wakened you."

"Why didn't you take it with the bracelet?" King asked her, holding it out. "Take it now. I don't want it."

She accepted it and laid it on the man's bronze armor. Then, however, she resumed it and played with it.

"Look again!" she said. "Think and look again!"

He looked, and he knew now. But he still preferred that she should tell him, and his lips shut tight.

"Can you guess why I changed my mind about you—wise man?"

She looked from him to the man on the bed and back to him again. Having solved the riddle, King had leisure to be interested in her eyes, and watched them analytically, like a jeweler appraising diamonds. They were strangely reminiscent, but much more changeable and colorful than any he had ever seen. They had the baffling trick of changing while he watched them.

"Having sent a man to kill you, why did I cease to want to kill you? Instead of losing you on the way to Khinjan, why did I run risks to protect you after you reached here? Why did I save your life in the Cavern of Earth's Drink tonight? You do not know yet? Then I will tell you something else you do not know. I was in Delhi when you were! I watched and listened while you and Rewa Gunga talked in my house! I was in Rewa Gunga's carriage on the train that he took and you did not! I have learned at first hand that you are not a fool. But that was not enough! You had to be three things—clever and brave and one other. The one other you are! Brave you have proved yourself to be! Clever you must be, to trick your way into Khinjan caves, even with Ismail at your elbow! That is why I saved your life—because you are those two things and — and — one other!"

She snatched a mirror from a little ivory table—a modern mirror—bad glass, bad art, bad workmanship, but silver warranted.

"Look in it and then at him!" she ordered.

But he did not need to look. The man on the bed was not so much like himself as the woman was like her, but the resemblance seemed to grow under his eyes. King was the taller and the younger by several years, but the noses were the same, and the wrinkled foreheads; both men had the same firm mouth; both looked like Romans.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Atheistan!"

She pronounced his given name as if she loved the word, standing straight again and looking into his eyes. There were high lights in hers that out-gleamed the diamonds on her dress.

"Your gods and mine have done this, Atheistan. When the gods combine they lay plans well indeed!"

"I only know one God," he answered simply, as a man speaks of the deep things in his heart.

"I know of many! They love me! They shall love you, too! Many are better than one! You shall learn to know my gods, for we are to be partners, you and I!"

She took his hand again, her eyes burning with excitement and mysticism and ambition like a fever. She seemed to take more than physical possession of him.

"What brought them here? Tell me that!" she demanded, pointing to the bed. "You think he brought her? I



"Can You Guess Why I Changed My Mind About You—Wise Man?"

tell you she was the spur that drove him! Is it a wonder that men called her the 'Heart of the Hills'? I found them ten years ago and clothed her and put new linen on their bed, for the old was all rags and dust. There have always been hundreds—and sometimes thousands—who knew the secret of Khinjan caves, but this has been a secret within a secret. Someone, who knew the secret before I, sawed those bracelets through and fitted hinges and clasps. The men you saw in the Cavern of Earth's Drink have no doubt I am the 'Heart of the Hills' come to life! They shall know thee as him within a little while!"

She held his hand a little tighter and pressed closer to him, laughing softly. He stood as if made of iron, and that only made her laugh the more.

"Tales of the 'Heart of the Hills' have puzzled the raj, haven't they, these many years? They sent me to find the source of them. Me! They chose well! There are not many like me! I have found this one dead woman who was like me. And in ten years, until you came, I have found no man like him!"

She tried to look into his eyes, but he frowned straight in front of him. His native costume and Rangar turbans did not make him seem any less a man. His frown, that was beginning to need shaving, was as grim and as satisfying as the dead Roman's. She stroked his left hand with soft fingers.

"I used to think I knew how to dance!" she laughed. "For ten years I have taken those pictures of her for my model and have striven to learn what she knew. I have surpassed her! I used to think I knew how to amuse myself with men's dreams—until I found this! Then I dreamed on my own account! My dream was true, my warrior! You have come! Our hour has come!"

She tugged at his hand. He was hers, soul and harness, if outward signs could prove it.

"Come!" she said. "Is this my hospitality? You are weary and hungry. Come!"

She led him by the hand, for it would have needed brute force to pry her fingers loose. She drew aside the leather curtain that hung on a bronze rod near the bed, led him through it, and let it clash to again behind them.

Now they were in the dark together, and it was not comprehended in her scheme of things to let circumstance be fallow. She pressed his hand, and sighed, and then hurried, whispering tender words he could scarcely catch. When they burst together through a curtain at the other end of a passage in the rock, his skin was red under the tan and for the first time her eyes refused to meet his.

"Why did they choose that cave to sleep in?" she asked him. "Is not this a better one? Who laid them there?"

He stared about. They were in a great room far more splendid than the first. There was a great fountain in the center splashing in the midst of flowers. They were cut flowers. The "Hills" must have been scoured for them within a day.

There were great cushioned couches all about and two thrones made of ivory and gold. Between two couches was a table, laden with golden plates and a golden jug, on pure white linen. There were two goblets of beaten gold and knives with golden handles and bronze blades. The whole room seemed to be drenched in the scent Yasmini favored, and there was the same frieze running round all four walls, with the woman depicted on it dancing.

"Come, we shall eat!" she said, leading him by the hand to a couch. She took the one facing him, and they lay like two Romans of the empire with the table in between.

She struck a golden gong then, and a native woman came in, who stared at King as if she had seen him before and did not like him. Yasmini nodded to the servant, who clasped her hands. At once came a stream of billmen, robed in white, who carried sherbet in bottles cooled in snow and dishes fragrant with hot food. He recognized his own prisoners from the Mir Khan Palace Jail, and nodded to them as they set the things down under the maid's direction. When they had finished eating Yasmini drove the maid away with a sharp word; he brought an ivory footstool and set it about a yard away from her waxen toes. And she, watching him with burning eyes, wound tresses of her hair around the golden dagger handle, making her jewels glitter with each movement.

"The gods of India, who are the only real gods, what do they think of it all! They have been good to the English, but they have had no thanks. They will stand aside now and watch a greater jihad than the world has ever seen! I love them, and they love me—as you shall love me, too! If they did not love both of us, we would not both be here! We must obey them!"

None of the East's amazing ways of courtship are ever tedious. Love springs into being on an instant and lives a thousand years inside an hour. She left no doubt as to her meaning. She and King were to love, as the East knows love, and then the world might have just what they two did not care to take from it.

His only possible course as yet was the defensive, and there is no defense like silence. He was still.

"The sarkar," she went on, "the silly sarkar fears that perhaps Turkey may enter the war. Perhaps a jihad may be proclaimed. So much for fear! I know! I have known for a very long time! And I have not let fear trouble me at all!"

Her eyes were on his steadily, and she read no fear in his, either, for none was there. In hers he saw ambition—triumph already—excitement—the gambler's love of all the biggest risks. Behind them burned genius and the devilry that would stop at nothing. As the general had told him in Peshawar, she would dare open hedges gate and ride the devil down the Khyber for the fun of it.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Crushed Possibilities.

Jones, the cub reporter, was fat, but he looked as melancholy as a fat man can when he entered the city editor's office.

"Why was my story killed?" he asked gloomily.

"An act of mercy," said the editor. "You fell down on it first."