

King of the Khyber Rifles

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

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

Morning looks down into Khinjan hours after the sun has risen, because the precipices shut it out. But the peaks on every side are very beacons of the range at the earliest peep of dawn. In silence they watched day's herald touch the peaks with rosy jeweled fingers—she waiting as if she expected the marvel of it all to make King speak.

It was cold. She came and snuggled close to him, and it was so they watched the sparkle of dawn's jewels die and the peaks grow gray again, she with an arm on his shoulder and strands of her golden hair blown past his face.

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked him at last.

"Of India, princess."
"What of India?"
"She lies helpless."
"Ah! You love India?"
"Yes."

"You shall love me better! You shall love me better than your life! Then, for love of me, you shall own the India you think you love! This letter shall go!" She tapped her bosom. "It is best to cut you off from India first. You shall lose that you may win!"

She got up and stood in the gap, smiling mockingly, framed in the darkness of the cave behind.

"I understand!" she said. "You think you are my enemy. Love and hate never lived side by side. You shall see!"

Her hands slipped into his, soft and warm; her eyes fastened on his and held them. And as they did so King sank, like a sack half-empty and toppled over sideways on the floor asleep.

He neither dreamed nor was conscious of anything, but slept like a dead man, having fought against her mesmerism harder than he knew.

Statesmen, generals, outlaws, all make their big mistakes and manage to recover. Very nearly always it is an apparently little mistake that does most damage in the end, something unnoticeable at the time, that grows in geometrical proportion, minus instead of plus.

Yasmin made her little mistake that minute in believing King was utterly mesmerized at last and utterly in her power. Whereas in truth he was only weary. It may be that she gave him orders in his sleep, after the accepted manner of mesmerists; but if she did, they never reached him; he was far too fast asleep. He slept so deep and long that he was not conscious of men's voices, nor of being carried, nor of time, nor of anxiety, nor of anything.

CHAPTER XVIII.

When King awoke he lay on a comfortable bed in a cave he had never yet seen, but there was no trace of Yasmin, nor of the men who must have carried him to it. He had no idea how long he had slept. It did not matter. He had probed Khinjan caves, and knew the whole purpose for which the lawless thousands had been gathering and were gathering still. Remained, to thwart that purpose. He began at the beginning, where he stood.

Behind him in a corner at the back of the cave was a narrow fissure, hung with a leather curtain, that was doubtless the door into Khinjan's heart; but the only way to the outer air was along a ledge above a dizzying precipice, so high that the huge waterfall looked like a little stream below. He was in a very eagle's aerial; the upper rim of Khinjan's gorge seemed not more than a quarter of a mile above him.

Round the corner, ten feet from the entrance, stood a guard, armed to the teeth, with a rifle, a sword, two pistols and a long curved Khyber knife stuck haphazard in his girdle. As he looked, a little procession of women, led by a man, came up the ledge. The man was armed, but the women were burdened with his own belongings—the medicine chest—his saddle and bridle—his unfired mule-pack. They came past the dumb man on guard and laid them all at King's feet just inside the cave.

He smiled, with that genial, face-transforming smile of his that has so often melted a road for him through ravening crowds. But the man in charge of the women did not grin. He was suffering. He growled at the women, and they went away like obedient animals, to sit half-way down the ledge and await further orders. He himself made as if to follow them, and the dumb man on guard did not pay much attention; he let women and man pass behind him, stepping one pace forward toward the edge to make more room. That was his last entirely voluntary act in this world.

With a suddenness that disarmed all opposition the other humped himself against the wall and bucked into the dumb man's back, sending him, weapons and all, hurtling over the precipice to the caverns into which the water tumbled thousands of feet away. The other ruffian spat after him, and then walked back to where King stood.

"Now heal me my bolts!" he said, grinning at last, doubtless from pleasure at the prospect. He was the same man who had stood on guard at the "ghost-cave" when Ismail led King

out to see the Cavern of Earth's Drink. The temptation was to fling the brute after his victim. The temptation always is to do the wrong thing—to cap wrath with wrath, injustice with vengeance. That way wars begin and are never ended. King beckoned him into the cave, and bent over the chest of medical supplies. Then, finding the light better for his purpose at the entrance, he called the man back and made him sit down on the box.

The business of lancing boils is not especially edifying in itself; but that particular minor operation probably saved India. But for hope of it the man with the boils would never have stood two turns on guard hand running and let the relief sleep on; so he



"Thou Liest! It was My Men Who Got the Head That Let Thee In! Else Why Art Thou Here?"

would not have been on duty when the message came to carry King's belongings to his new cave of residence. There would have been no object in killing the dumb man, and so there would have been an expert with a loaded rifle to keep Muhammad Anim lurking down the trail.

Muhammad Anim came—like the devil, to scotch King's faith. He had followed the women with the loads. He stood now, like a big bear on a mountain track, swaying his head from side to side six feet away. King jumped, nearly driving the lance into a new place in his patient's neck.

"Let him go!" growled Muhammad Anim. "Go, thou! Stand guard over the women until I come!"

The mullah turned a rifle this way and that in his paws, like a great bear dancing. The very Orakzal Pathan who had sat next King in the Cavern of Earth's Drink, was creeping up behind the women and already had his rifle leveled at the man with bolts.

"Aye!" said the mullah, watching King's eyes. "He has done well, and the road is clear!"

The man with bolts offered no fight. He dropped his rifle and threw his hands up. In a moment the Orakzal Pathan was in command of two rifles, holding King from among the women, whom he seemed to regard as his plunder too. The women appeared supremely indifferent in any event. King nodded back to him. A friend is a friend in the "Hills," and rare is the man who spares his enemy.

"None comes to earn a living in the 'Hills,'" growled the mullah, swaying his head slowly and devouring King with cruel calculating eyes. "Why art thou here?"

"I slew a man," said King. "Thou liest! It was my men! Who got the head that let thee in! Speak! Why art thou here?"

But King did not answer. The mullah resumed.

"He who brought me the message yesterday says he has it from another, who had it from a third, that thou art here because she plans a simultaneous rising in India, and thou art from the Punjab where the Sikhs all wait to rise. Is that true?"

"Thy man said it," answered King. "Then hear me!" said the mullah. "Listen, thou." But he did not begin to speak yet. He tried to see past King into the cave and to peer about into the shadows.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Her man Rewa Gunga went yesterday, with three men and a letter to carry down the Khyber. But where is she?"

So he had slept the clock round! King did not answer. He blocked the way into the cave and looked past the mullah. The Orakzal Pathan crouched among the women, and the women grinned. The mullah stared into King's face, with the scrutiny of a trader appraising loot. Fire leaped up behind his calculating eyes. And without a word passing between them, King knew that this man as well as Yasmin was in possession of the secret of the Sleeper. Perhaps he knew it first; perhaps she snatched the keeping of the secret from him. At all events he knew it and recognized King's likeness to the Sleeper, for his eyes betrayed him. He began to stroke

his beard monotonously with one hand. The rifle, that he pretended to be holding, really leaned against his back and with the free hand he was making signals.

King knew well he was making signals. But he knew too that in Yasmin's power, her prisoner, he had no chance at all of interfering with her plans. Having grounded on the bottom of impotence, so to speak, any tide that would take him off must be a good tide. He pretended to be aware of nothing, and to be particularly unaware that the Pathan, with a rifle in each hand, was pretending to come casually up the path.

In a minute he was covered by a rifle. In another minute the mullah had lashed his hands. In five minutes more the women were loaded again with his belongings and they were all half-way down the track in single file, the mullah bringing up the rear, descending backward with rifle ready against surprise, as if he expected Yasmin and her men to pounce out any minute to the rescue.

They entered a tunnel and wound along it, stepping at short intervals over the bodies of three stabbed sentries. The Pathan spurned them with his heel as he passed. In the glare at the tunnel's mouth King tripped over the body of a fourth man and fell with his chin beyond the edge of a sheer precipice.

They were on a ledge above the waterfall again, having come through a projection on the cliff's side, for Khinjan is all rat-runs and projections, like a sponge or a hornet's nest on a titanic scale.

They soon reached another cave, at which the mullah stopped. It was a dark ill-smelling hole, but he ordered King into it and the Pathan after him on guard, after first seeing the women pile all their loads inside. Then he took the women away and went off muttering to himself, swagging, swinging his right arm as he strode, in a way few natives do.

"Let us hope he has forgotten these!" the Pathan grinned, touching the pile of rifles. "Weight for weight in silver they will bring me a fine price! He may forget. He dreams. For a mullah he cares less for meat and money than any I ever saw. He is mad, I think. It is my opinion Allah touched him."

"What is that, under thy shirt?" King asked.

The Pathan grinned, and undid the button. There was a second shirt underneath, and to that on the left breast were pinned two British medals.

"Oh, yes!" he laughed. "I served the raj! I was in the army eleven years."

"Why did you leave it?" King asked, remembering that this man loved to hear his own voice.

"Oh, I had furlough. I knifed a man this side of the border. It was no affair of the British. But I was seen, and I entered this place. It is a devil of a place."

Now the art of ruling India consists not in treading barefooted on scorpions—not in virtuous indignation at men who know no better—but in seeking for and making much of the gold that lies ever amid the dross. There is gold in the character of any man who



"What is Under Thy Shirt?" King Asked.

once passed the grilling tests before enlistment in a British-Indian regiment. It may need experience to lay a finger on it, but it is surely there.

"I heard," said King, "as I came toward the Khyber in great haste (for the police were at my heels)—"

"Ah, the police!" the Pathan grinned pleasantly. The inference was that at some time or other he had left his mark on the police.

"I heard," said King, "that the sarkar has offered pardons to all deserters who return."

"Hah! But thou art a hakim, not a soldier!"

"Hills! I am minded to go back and seek that pardon! It would feel good to stand in the ranks again, with a stiff-backed sahib out in front of me, and the thunder of the gun-wheels going by. The salt was good! Come thou with me!"

"The pardon is for deserters," King objected, "not for political offenders."

"Haugh!" said the Pathan, bringing down his flat hand hard on the hakim's thigh. "I will attend to that for thee. I will obtain my pardon first. Then will I lead thee by the hand to the karnal sahib and lie to him and say, 'This is the one who persuaded me against my will to come back to the regiment!'"

"Thou art a dreamer!" said King. "Untie my hands; the thong cuts me."

The Pathan obeyed.

"Dreamer, am I? It is good to dream such dreams. By Allah, I've a mind to see that dream come true! I never slew a man on Indian soil, only in these 'Hills.' I will go to them and say, 'Here I am! I am a deserter. I seek that pardon! Truly I will go! Come thou with me, little hakim!'"

"Nay," said King. "I have another thought. You who were seen to slay a man, and I who am a political offender, do not win pardons so easily as we came bearing gifts."

"Gifts? Has Allah touched thee? What gifts should we bring? A dozen stolen rifles? A bag of silver? And I am the dreamer, am I?"

"Nay," said King. "I am the dreamer. There are others in these 'Hills'—others in Khinjan who wear British medals!"

The Pathan nodded. "Hundreds. Men fight first on one side, then on the other, being true to either side while the contract lasts. In all there must be the makings of many regiments among the 'Hills.'"

King nodded. He himself had seen the chieftains come to parley after the Tirah war. Most of them had worn British medals and had worn them proudly.

"If we two," he said, speaking slowly, "could speak with some of those men and stir the spirit in them and persuade them to feel as thou dost, mentioning the pardon for deserters and the probability of bonuses to the time-expired for re-enlistment; if we could march down the Khyber with a hundred such, or even with fifty or with twenty-five or with a dozen men—we would receive our pardon for the sake of service rendered."

"Good!"

The Pathan thumped him on the back so hard that his eyes watered.

"We would have to use much caution," King advised him, when he was able to speak again.

"Aye! If Bull-with-a-beard got wind of it he would have us crucified. And if she heard of it—"

He was silent. Apparently there were no words in his tongue that could compass his dread of her revenge. He was silent for ten minutes, and King sat still beside him, letting memory of other days do its work—memory of the long, clean regimental lines, and of order and decency and of justice handed out to all and sundry by gentlemen who did not think themselves too good to wear a native regiment's uniform.

"In two days I could do the drill again as well as ever," he said at last. Then there was silence again for fifteen minutes more. "I could always shoot," he murmured; "I could always shoot."

When Muhammad Anim came back they had both forgotten to replace the lashing on King's wrists, but the mullah seemed not to notice it.

"Come!" he ordered, with a sidewise jerk of his great ugly head, and then stood muttering impatiently while they obeyed.

They marched downward through interminable tunnels and along ledges poised between earth and heaven, until they came at last to the tunnel leading to the one entrance into Khinjan caves. Just before they entered it two more of the mullah's men came up with them, leading horses. One horse was for the mullah, and they helped King mount the other, showing him more respect than is usually shown a prisoner in the "Hills."

Then the mullah led the way into the tunnel, and he seemed in deadly fear. The echo of the hoof-beats irritated him. He eyed each hole in the roof as if Yasmin might be expected to shoot down at him or drench him with boiling oil and hurried past; each of them at a trot, only to draw rein immediately afterward because the noise was too great.

It became evident that his men had been at work here too, for at intervals along the passage lay dead bodies. Yasmin must have posted the men there, but where was she? Each of them lay dead with a knife wound in his back, and the mullah's men possessed themselves of rifles and knives and cartridges, wiping off blood that had scarcely cooled yet.

When they came to the end of the tunnel it was to find the door into the mosque open in front of them. And twenty more of Muhammad Anim's men standing guard over the eyelashless mullah. They had bound and

gagged him. At a word from Muhammad Anim they loosed him; and at a threat the hairless one gave a signal that brought the great stone door sliding forward on its oiled bronze grooves.

Then, with a dozen jests thrown to the hairless one for consolation, and an utter indifference to the sacredness of the mosque floor, they sought outer air, and Muhammad Anim led them up the Street of the Dwellings toward Khinjan's outer ramparts. They reached the outer gate without incident and hurried into the great dry valley beyond it. As they rode across the valley the mullah thumbed a long string of beads. Unlike Yasmin, he was praying to one god; but he seemed to have many prayers. His back was a picture of determined treachery—the backs of his men were expressions of the creed that "he shall keep who can!" King rode all but last now and had a good view of their unconsciously hunted blackguardism. There was not a hint of honor or tenderness among the lot, man, woman or mullah. Yet his heart sang within him as if he were riding to his own marriage feast!

Last of all, close behind him, marched his friend, the Orakzal Pathan, and as they picked their way among the boulders across the mile-wide moat the two contrived to fall a little to the rear. The Pathan began speaking in a whisper and King, riding with lowered head as if he were studying the dangerous track, listened.

"She sent her man Rewa Gunga toward the Khyber with a message," he whispered. "He took a few men with him, and he is to send them with the message when they reach the Khyber, but he is to come back. All he went for is to make sure the message is not intercepted, for Bull-with-a-beard is growing reckless these days. He knew what was doing and said at once that she is treating with the British, but there were few who believed that. There are more who wonder where she hides while the message is on its way. None has seen her. Men have swarmed into the Cavern of Earth's Drink and howled for her, but she did not come. Then the mullah went to look for his ammunition that he stored and sealed in a cave. And it was gone. It was all gone. And there was no proof of who had taken it!"

"Hakim, there be some who say—and Bull-with-a-beard is one of them—that she is afraid and hides."

"His men say he is desperate. His own are losing faith in him. He snatched thee to be a bait for her, having it in mind that a man whom she hides in her private part of Khinjan must be of great value to her. He has sworn to have thee skinned alive on a hot rock should she fail to come to terms!"

"CHAPTER XIX.

The march went on in single file until the sun died down in splendid fury. Then there began to be a wind that they had to lean against, but the women were allowed no rest.

At last at a place where the trail began to widen, the mullah beckoned King to ride beside him. It was not that he wished to be communicative, but there were things King knew that he did not know, and he had his own way of asking questions.

"D—hakim!" he growled. "Pill-man! Poulitcer! That is a sweeper's trade of thine! Thou shalt apply it at my camp! I have some wounded and some sick."

King did not answer, but buttoned his coat closer against the keen wind. The mullah mistook the shudder for one of another kind.

"Did she choose thee only for thy face?" he asked. "Did she not consider thy courage? Does she love thee well enough to ransom thee?"

Again King did not answer, but he watched the mullah's face keenly in the dark and missed nothing of its expression. He decided the man was in doubt—even racked by indecision.

"Should she not ransom thee, hakim, thou shalt have a chance to show my men how a man out of India can die! By and by I will lend thee a messenger to send to her. Better make the message clear and urgent! Thou shalt state my terms to her and plead thine own cause in the same letter. My camp lies yonder."

He motioned with one sweep of his arm toward a valley that lay in shadow far below them. As they approached it the rock clove in two and became two great pillars, with a man on each. And between the pillars they looked down into a valley lit by fires that burned before a thousand hide tents, with shadows by the hundred flitting back and forth between them. A dull roar, like the voice of an army, rose out of the gorge.

"More than four thousand men!" said the mullah proudly.

"What are four thousand for a raid into India?" sneered King, greatly daring.

"Wait and see!" growled the mullah; but he seemed depressed.

He led the way downward, getting off his horse and giving the reins to a man. King copied him, and partway sliding, part stumbling down they found their way along the dry bed of a water-course between two spurs of a hillside, until they stood at last in the

midst of a cluster of a dozen sentries, close to a tamarisk to which a man's body hung spiked. That the man had been spiked to it alive was suggested by the body's attitude.

Without a word to the sentries the mullah led on down a lane through the midst of the camp, toward a great open cave at the far side, in which a bonfire cast fitful light and shadow. Watchers sitting by the thousand tents yawned at them, but took no particular notice.

The mouth of the cave was like a lion's, fringed with teeth. There were men in it, ten or eleven of them, all armed, squatting round the fire.

"Get out!" growled the mullah. But they did not obey. They sat and stared at him.

"Have ye tents?" the mullah asked, in a voice like thunder.

"Aye!" But they did not go yet.

"One of the men, he nearest the mullah, got on his feet, but he had to step back a pace, for the mullah would not give ground and their breath was in each other's faces.

"Where are the bombs? And the rifles? And the many cartridges?" he demanded. "We have waited long, Muhammad Anim. Where are they now?"

The others got up, to lend the first man encouragement. They leaned on rifles and surrounded the mullah, so that King could only get a glimpse of him between them. They seemed in no mood to be treated cavalierly—in no mood to be argued with. And the mullah did not argue.

"Ye dogs!" he growled at them, and he strode through them to the fire and chose himself a good, thick burning brand. "Ye sons of nameless mothers!"

Then he charged them suddenly, beating them over head and face and shoulders, driving them in front of him, utterly reckless of their rifles.

"So Thou Art to Ape the Sleeper in His Bronze Mail, Eh!"

His own rifle lay on the ground behind him, and King kicked its stock clear of the fire.

"Oh, I shall pray for you this night!" Muhammad Anim snarled. "What a curse I shall beg for you! Oh, what a burning of the bowels ye shall have! What a sickness! What running of the eyes! What sores! What boils! What sleepless nights and faithless women shall be yours! What a prayer I will pray to Allah!"

They scattered into outer gloom before his rage, and then came back to kneel to him and beg him withdraw his curse. He kicked them as they knelt and drove them away again. Then, silhouetted in the cave mouth, with the glow of the fire before him, he stood with folded arms and dared them shoot.

After five minutes of angry contemplation of the camp he turned on a contemptuous heel and came back to the fire, throwing on more fuel from a great pile in a corner. There was an iron pot in the embers. He seized a stick and stirred the contents furiously, then set the pot between his knees and ate like an animal. He passed the pot to King when he had finished, but fingers had passed too many times through what was left in it and the very thought of eating the mess made his gorge rise; so King thanked him and set the pot aside.

Then, "That is thy place!" Muhammad Anim growled, pointing over his shoulder to a ledge of rock, like a shelf in the far wall. But though he was allowed to climb up and lie down, he was not allowed to sleep—nor did he want to sleep—for more than an hour to come.

The mullah came over from the fire again and stood beside him, glaring like a great animal and grumbling in his beard.

"Does she surely love thee?" he asked at last, and King nodded, because he knew he was on the trail of information:

"So thou art to ape the Sleeper in his bronze mail, eh? Thou art to come to life, as she was said to come to life, and the two of you are to plunder India? Is that it?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)