

King of the Khyber Rifles

By TALBOT MUNDY

The Most Picturesque Romance of the Decade

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KING HAS A FINAL CONFERENCE WITH HIS FRIENDS AT THE MOUTH OF KHYBER PASS AND PREPARES FOR THE JOURNEY INTO STRANGE COUNTRY.

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 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 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.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

The Rangar's eyes blazed for a second and then grew cold again, as King did not fail to observe. All this while the women danced on, in time to wailing flute music, until, it seemed from nowhere, a lovelier woman than any of them appeared in their midst, sitting cross-legged with a flat basket at her knees. She sat with arms raised and swayed from the waist as if in a delirium. Her arms moved in narrowing circles, higher and higher above the basket lid, and the lid began to rise. It was minutes before the bodies of two great king cobras could be made out, moving against the woman's spangled dress with hoods raised, hissing the cobra's hate-song that is prelude to the poison-death.

They struck at the woman, one after the other, and she leaped out of their range, swift and as supple as they. Instantly then she joined in the dance, with the snakes striking right and left at her. Left and right she swayed to avoid them, far more gracefully than a matador avoids the bull and courting a deathlier peril than he—poisonous, two to his one. As she danced she whirled both arms above her head and cried as the werewolves are said to do on stormy nights.

"Do you do this often?" wondered King, in a calm aside to Rewa Gunga, turning half toward him and taking his eyes off the dance without any very great effort.

Rewa Gunga clapped his hands and the dance ceased. The woman sprited her snakes away. The blind was drawn upward and in a moment all was normal again with the punkah swinging slowly overhead, except that the seductive smell remained, that was like the early-morning breath of all the different flowers of India.

"If she were here," said the Rangar, a little grimly—with a trace of disappointment in his tone—"you would not snatch your eyes away like that? Perhaps you shall see her dance some day! Ah—here is Ismail," he added in an altered tone of voice. He seemed relieved at sight of the Afridi.

Bursting through the glass-bead curtains at the door, the great savage strode down the room, holding out a telegram. With a murmur of conventional apology King tore the envelope



As She Danced She Whirled Both Arms Above Her Head and Cried as the Werewolves Are Said to Do on Stormy Nights.

and in a second his eyes were ablaze with something more than wonder. A mystery, added to a mystery, stirred all the zeal in him. But in a second he had sweated his excitement down.

"Read that, will you?" he said, passing it to Rewa Gunga. It was not in cypher, but in plain every-day English.

She had not gone North. She is still in Delhi. Suit your own movements to your plans.

"Can you explain?" asked King in a level voice. He was watching the

Rangar narrowly, yet he could not detect the slightest symptom of emotion.

"Explain?" said the Rangar. "Who can explain foolishness? It means that another fat general has made another fat mistake!"

"Ah!" said King. "You are positive she has started for the North?"

"Salih, when she speaks it is best to believe! She told me she will go. Therefore I am ready to lead King sahib up the Khyber to her!"

"There's a train leaves for the North tonight," said King.

The Rangar nodded.

"You'll want a pass up the line. How many servants? Three—four—how many?"

"One," said the Rangar, and King was instantly suspicious of the modesty of that allowance; however he wrote out a pass for Rewa Gunga and one servant and gave it to him.

"Be there on time and see about your own reservation," he said. "I'll attend to Ismail's pass myself."

He folded the list of names that the Rangar had marked and wrote something on the back. Then he begged an envelope, and Rewa Gunga had one brought to him. He sealed the list in the envelope, addressed it and beckoned Ismail again.

"Take this to Saunders sahib!" he ordered. "Go first to the telegraph office, where you were before, the babu there will tell you where Saunders sahib may be found. Deliver the letter to him. Then come and find me at the Star of India hotel and help me to bathe and change my clothes."

"To hear is to obey!" boomed Ismail, bowing; but his last glance was for Rewa Gunga, and he did not turn to go until he had met the Rangar's eyes.

When Ismail had gone striding down the room King looked into the Rangar's eyes with that engaging frankness of his that disarms so many people.

"Then you'll be on the train tonight?" he asked.

"To hear is to obey! With pleasure, sahib!"

"Then good-by until this evening."

King bowed very civilly and walked out, rather unsteadily because his head ached. Probably nobody else, except the Rangar, could have guessed what an ordeal he had passed through or how near he had been to losing self-command.

In the street he found a gharry after a while and drove to his hotel. And before Ismail came he took a stroll through a bazaar, where he made a few strange purchases. In the hotel lobby he invested in a leather bag with a good lock, in which to put them. Later on Ismail came and proved himself an efficient body-servant.

That evening Ismail carried the leather bag and found his place on the train, and that was not so difficult, because the trains running North were nearly empty, although the platforms were all crowded. As he stood at the carriage door with Ismail near him, a man named Saunders slipped through the crowd and sought him out.

"Arrested 'em all!" he grinned.

King did not answer. He was watching Rewa Gunga, followed by a servant, hurrying to a reserved compartment at the front end of the train. The Rangar waved to him and he waved back.

The engine gave a preliminary shriek and the giant Ismail nudged King's elbow in impatient warning. There was no more sign of Rewa Gunga, who had evidently settled down in his compartment for the night.

"Get my bag out again!" King ordered, and Ismail stared.

"Get out my bag, I said!"

"To hear is to obey!" Ismail grumbled, reaching with his long arm through the window.

The engine shrieked again, somebody whistled, and the train began to move.

"You've missed it!" said Saunders, amused at Ismail's frantic disappointment.

CHAPTER V.

The rear lights of the train he had not taken swayed out of Delhi station and King grinned as he wiped the sweat from his face with a dripping handkerchief. Behind him towered the hook-nosed Ismail, resentful of the unexpected. In front of him Saunders eyed the proffered black cheroots suspiciously, accepted one with an air of curiosity and passed the case back.

Around them the clatter of the station crowd began to die, and Parsimony in a shabby uniform went round to lower lights.

"Are you sure—"
King's merry eyes looked into Saunders' as if there were no world war really and they two were puppets in a comedy.

"—are you absolutely certain Yasmini is in Delhi?"
"No," said Saunders. "What I swear to is that she has not left by train. She's the most elusive individual in Asia! One person in the world knows where she is, unless she has an accomplice. My information's negative. I know she has not gone by—"
King struck a match and held it out, so the sentence was unfinished; the first few puffs of the astonishing cigar wiped out all memory of the missing word. And then King changed the subject.

"Those men I asked you to arrest—?"
"Nabbed"—puff—"every one of 'em!"
"—puff-puff—"all under"—puff-puff—"lock and key,—best smoke I ever tasted."

"Well—I'll go along with you if you like and look them over."
Both tone and manner gave Saunders credit for the suggestion, and Saunders seemed to like it. There is nothing like following up, in football, war or courtship.

"I see you're a judge of a cigar," said King, and Saunders purred, all men being fools to some extent, and the only trouble being to demonstrate the fact.

They had started for the station entrance when a nasal voice began intoning, "Cap-teen King sahib—Cap-teen King sahib!" and a telegraph messenger passed them with his book under his arm. King whistled him. A moment later he was tearing open an official urgent telegram and writing a string of figures in pencil across the top. Then he de-coded swiftly:

Advices are Yasmini was in Delhi as recently as six this evening. Fail to understand your inability to get in touch. Have you tried at her house? Matters in Khyber district much less satisfactory. Word from O-C Khyber rifles to effect that laskhar is collecting. Better sweep up in Delhi and proceed northward as quickly as compatible with caution. L. M. L.

"Good news?" asked Saunders, blowing smoke through his nose.

"Excellent. Where's my man? Here you—Ismail!"

The giant came and towered above him.

"You swore she went North!"

"In, sahib! To Peshawur she went!"

"I have a telegram here that says she is in Delhi!"

He patted his coat, where the inner pocket bulged.

"Nay, then the tar lies, for I saw her go with these two eyes of mine!"

"It is not wise to lie to me, my friend," King assured him, so pleasantly that none could doubt he was telling truth.

"If I lie may I eat dirt!" Ismail answered him.

Inches lent the Afridi dignity, but dignity has often been used as a stalking horse for untruth. King nodded, and it was not possible to judge by his expression whether he believed or not.

"Let's make a move," he said, turning to Saunders. "She seems at my rate to wish it believed she has gone North. I'll take the early morning train. Where are the prisoners?"

"In the old Mir Khan palace. Shall we take this gharry?"

With Ismail up beside the driver nursing King's bag and looking like a great grim vulture about to eat the horse, they drove back through swarming streets in the direction of the river. King seemed to have lost all interest in crowds. He sat staring ahead in silence, although Saunders made more than one effort to engage him in conversation.

"No!" he said at last suddenly—so that Saunders jumped.

"No what?"

"No need to stay here. I've got what I came for!"

"What was that?" asked Saunders, but King was silent again. Conscious of the unaccustomed weight on his left wrist, he moved his arm so that the sleeve drew and he could see the edge of the great gold bracelet Rewa Gunga had given him in Yasmini's name.

"Know anything of Rewa Gunga?" he asked suddenly again.

"Not much. I've seen him. I've spoken with him, and I've had to stand impudently from him—twice. I've been tipped off more than once to let him alone because he's her man. He does ticklish errands for her, or so they say. He's what you might call 'known to the police' all right."

They began to approach an age-old palace near the river, and Saunders whispered a password when an armed guard halted them. They were halted again at a gloomy gateway where an officer came out to look them over; by his leave they left the gharry and followed him under the arch until their heels rang on stone paving in a big ill-lighted courtyard surrounded by high walls.

There, after a little talk, they left Ismail squatting beside King's bag, and

Saunders led the way through a modern iron door, into what had once been a royal prince's stables.

In gloom that was only thrown into contrast by a wide-spread row of electric lights, a long line of barred and locked converted horse stalls ran down one side of a lean-to building. All that King could see of the men within was the whites of their eyes. And they did not look friendly.

He had to pass between them and the light, and they could see more of him than he could of them. At the first cell he raised his left hand and made the gold bracelet on his wrist clink against the steel bars.

A moment later he cursed himself, and felt the bracelet with his finger



"May God Be With Thee!" Boomed the Prisoner's Voice.

nailed. He had made a deep nick in the soft gold. A second later yet he smiled.

"May God be with thee!" boomed a prisoner's voice in Pashtu.

"Didn't know that fellow was handcuffed," said Saunders. "Did you hear the ring? They should have been taken off. Leaving his irons on has made him polite, though."

"Where did you arrest them?" King asked when Saunders came to a stand under a light.

"All in one place. At All's."

"Who and what is All?"

"Thief—crimp—procurer—Prussian spy and any other evil thing that takes his fancy! Runs a combination gambling hell and boarding house. Let's 'em run into debt and blackmail 'em. All's in the Kaiser's pay—that's known! We'll get him when we want him, but at present he's useful 'as is' for a decoy."

"You wouldn't call these men prosperous, then?"

"Not exactly! All is the only spy out of the North who prospers much at present, and even he gets most of his money out of his private business. The Germans pay All a little, and he traps the billmen when they come south—lets 'em gamble—gets 'em into debt—they can get away when they've paid him what they owe. Yasmini sends and pays their board and gambling debts, and she's our man, so to speak. She conxes all their stories out of 'em and primes 'em with a few extra good ones into the bargain. Everybody's fooled—specially the Germans—and exceptin', of course, Yasmini and the raj. Nobody ever fooled that woman, nor ever will if my belief goes for anything!"

"Um-m-m!" King rubbed his chin.

"Know anything of my man Ismail?"

"Sure! He's one of Yasmini's pets. She balled him out of All's three years ago and he worships her. It was he who broke the leg and ribs of a purrajah a month or two ago for putting on too much dog in her reception room. He's Ursus out of 'Quo Vadis!' He's dog, desperado, stalking horse and keeper of the queen's secrets!"

"Then why d'you suppose she passed him along to me?" asked King.

"Dunno! This is your little mystery, not mine!"

"Glad you appreciate that! Do me a favor, will you?"

"Anything in reason."

"Get the keys to all these cells—send 'em in here to me by Ismail—and leave me in here alone!"

Saunders whistled and wiped sweat from his glistening face, for in spite of windows wide open to the courtyard was hotter than a furnace room.

"Mayn't I have you thrown into a den of tigers?" he asked. "Or a nest of cobras? Or get the fiery furnace ready? That 'God be with thee' stuff is habit—they say it with unctious before they knife a man!"

"I'll be careful, then," King chuckled; and it is a fact that few men can argue with him when he laughs quietly in that way. "Send me in the keys, like a good chap."

So Saunders went, glad enough to get into the outer air. The instant the

door slammed King continued down the line with his left wrist held high so that the occupant of each cell in turn could see the bracelet.

"May God be with thee!" came the instant greeting from each cell until down toward the farther end. The occupants of the last six cells were silent. He had scarcely finished doing that when Ismail strode in, slamming the great iron door behind him, jangling a bunch of keys and looking more than ever like somebody out of the Old Testament.

"Open every door except those whose numbers I have rubbed out!" King ordered him.

Ismail proceeded to obey as if that were the least improbable order in all the world. It took him two minutes to select the pass-key and determine how it worked, then the doors flew open one after another in quick succession.

"Come out!" he growled. "Come out!—Come out!" although King had not ordered that.

King went and stood under the center light with his left arm bared. The prisoners emerging like dead men out of tombs, blinked at the bright light—saw him—then the bracelet—and saluted.

"May God be with thee!" growled each of them.

They stood still then, awaiting fresh developments. It did not seem to occur to any one of them as strange that a British officer in khaki uniform should be sporting Yasmini's talisman; the thing was apparently sufficient explanation in itself.

"Ye all know this?" he asked, holding up his wrist. "Whose is this?"

"Hers!" The answer was monosyllabic and instant from all thirty throats.

King lit a cheroot and made mental note of the wisdom of referring to her by pronoun, not by name.

"And I? Who am I?" he asked.

"Her messenger! Who else? Thou art he who shall take us to the 'Hills'!" She promised.

"I shall start for the 'Hills' at dawn," King said slowly, and he watched their eyes gleam at the news. No caged tiger is as wretched as a prisoned hillman. No freed bird wings more wildly for the open. No moth comes more foolishly back to the flame again. It was easy to take pity on them—probably not one of whom knew pity's meaning.

"Is there any among you who would care to come—?"

"Ah-h-h-h!"

"Will ye obey me and him?" he asked, laying his hand on Ismail's shoulder, as much to let them see the bracelet again as for any other reason.

"Aye! If we fail, Allah do more to us!"

King laughed. "Ye shall leave this place as my prisoners. Here ye have no friends. Here ye must obey. But what when ye come to your 'Hills' at last? Can one man hold thirty men prisoner's then? In the 'Hills' will ye still obey me?"

The answer to that was unexpected. Ismail knelt—seized his hand—and pressed the gold bracelet to his lips! In turn, every one of them filed by, knelt reverently and kissed the bracelet!

"Saw ye ever a hillman do that before?" asked Ismail. "They will obey thee! Have no fear!"

"Then come!" ordered King, turning his back confidently on thirty savages whom Saunders, for instance, would have preferred to drive in front of him, after first seeing them handcuffed.

"Each lock has a key, but some keys fit all locks," says the Eastern proverb. King has been chosen for many ticklish errands in his time, and Saunders is still in Delhi.

The prisoners were left squatting under the eyes and bayonets of a very suspicious prison guard, who made no secret of being ready for all conceivable emergencies. One enthusiast drew the cartridge out of his breech chamber and licked it at intervals of a minute or two, to the very great interest of the hillmen, who memorized every detail that by any stretch of imagination might be expected to improve their own shooting when they should get home again.

King found his way on foot through a maze of streets to a place where he was admitted through one door after another by sentries who saluted when he had whispered to them. He ended by sitting on the end of the bed of a gray-headed man who owns three titles and whose word is law between the borders of a province. To him he talked as one schoolboy to a bigger one, because the gray-haired man had understanding, and hence sympathy.

"I don't envy you!" said he under the sheet. "There's the release for your prisoners. Take it—and take them! Whatever possessed you to want such a gift?"

"Well, sir—first place, she doesn't want to seem to be connected with me. Second place, she has left Delhi—and she did not mean to leave those men. Third place, if those thirty men had been anything but her particular pet gang they'd either have been over the border or else in jail before now—just like all the others. For some reason that I don't pretend to understand, she promised 'em more than she has been able to perform. So I provide performances. She gets the credit for it. I get a pretty good personal following at least as far as up the Khyber! Q. E. D., sir."

The man in bed nodded. "Not bad," he said.

"Didn't she make some effort to get those men away from All's?" King asked him. "I mean, didn't she try to get them dry-nursed by the sarkar in some way?"

"Yes, she did. But she wanted them arrested and locked up at a moment when the jails were all crowded. She

must have known our fix. She shouldn't have asked."

King smiled. "Perfectly good opportunity for me, sir!" he said cheerfully.

"So you seem to think. But look out for that woman, King—she's dangerous. She's got the brains of Asia coupled with Western energy! I think she's on our side, and I know he believes it; but watch her!"

"Ham dekta hai!" King grinned. But the older man continued to look as if he pitied him.

"If you get through alive, come and tell me about it afterward. Now, mind you do! I'm awfully interested, but as for envying you—"

"Envy!" King almost squealed. He made the bedsprings rattle as he jumped. "I wouldn't swap jobs with General French, sir!"

"Nor with me, I suppose!"

"Nor with you, sir!"

"Goodby, then. Goodby, King, my boy. Goodby, Athelstan. Your brother's up the Khyber, isn't he? Give him my regards. Goodby!"

CHAPTER VI.

Long before dawn the thirty prisoners and Ismail squatted in a little herd on the up-platform of a railway station, shepherded by King, who smoked a cheroot some twenty paces away, sitting on an unmarked chest of medicine. He seemed absorbed in a book on surgery. Ismail nursed the new handbag on his knees, picking everlastingly at the lock and wondering audibly what the bag contained to an accompaniment of low-growled sympathy.

"I am his servant—for she said so—and he said so. Then why—why in Allah's name—am I not to have the key of this little bag that holds so little and is so light?"

"A razor would slit the leather easily," suggested one of the herd. "Then later, the bag might be pushed violently against some sharp thing, to explain the cut."

Ismail shook his head.

"Why? What could he do to thee?"

"It is because I know not what he would do to me that I will do nothing!" answered Ismail. "He is not at all like other sahibs I have had dealings with. This man does unexpected things. This man is not mad, he has a devil. I have it in my heart to love this man. But such talk is foolishness. We are all her men!"

"Aye! We are her men!" came the chorus, so that King looked up and watched them over the open book.

At dawn, when the train pulled out the thirty prisoners sat safely locked in third-class compartments. King lay lazily on the cushions of a first-class carriage in the rear, and Ismail attended to the careful packing of soda water bottles in the icebox on the floor.

"Shall I open the little bag, sahib?" he asked.

"Put it over there!" King ordered. "Set it down!"

Ismail obeyed and King laid his boot down to light another of his black cheroots. The theme of antiseptic ceased to exercise its charm over him. He peeled off his tunic, changed his shirt and lay back in sweet content



"Look Out for the Woman, King—She's Dangerous. She's Got the Brains of Asia Coupled With Western Energy."

ment. Headed for the "Hills," who would not be contented, who had been born in their very shadow?—in their shadow, of a line of Britons who have all been buried there!

"The day after tomorrow I'll see snow!" he promised himself. And Ismail, grinning with yellow teeth through a gap in his wayward beard, understood and sympathized.

Forward in the third-class carriages the prisoners hugged themselves and crooned as they met old landmarks and recognized the changing scenery. There was a new, cleaner tang in the hot wind that spoke of the "Hills" and home!

At Peshawur the train was shortened to three coaches and started up the spur-track, that leads to Jamrud, where a fort covers in the very throat of the dreadful gorge in Asia—the Khyber pass.

The Rangar deserts King and his native escort in a dangerous part of Khyber pass, and the special agent tastes more weird adventure.

(TO BE CONTINUED)