

# King of the Khyber Rifles

By TALBOT MUNDY

## The Most Picturesque Romance of the Decade

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**KING IS LED TO VISIT A VAST CAVE THROUGH WHICH AN UNDERGROUND RIVER FLOWS, AND IN A GREAT CAVERN MEETS THOUSANDS OF FANATICS**

**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 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.

### CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

"Are there devils in Tophet? Fire and my veins are one!"

The man did not notice the eagerness beaming out of King's horn-rimmed spectacles, but Ismail did; it seemed to him time to prove his virtues as assistant.

"This is the famous hakim Kurram Khan," he boasted. "He can cure anything, and for a very little fee!"

The man looked incredulous, but King drew the covering from his row of instruments and bottles.

"Take a chance!" he advised. "None but the brave wins anything!"

Ismail and Darya Khan were new to the business and enthusiastic. They had the man down, held tight on the floor to the huge amusement of the rest, before he could even protest; and his howls of rage did him no good, for Ismail drove the hilt of a knife between his open jaws to keep them open.

A very large proportion of King's stores consisted of morphia and cocaine. He injected enough cocaine to deaden the man's nerves, and allowed it time to work. Then he drew out three back teeth in quick succession, to make sure he had the right one.

Ismail let the victim up, and Darya Khan gave him water in a brass cup. Utterly without pain for the first time for days, the man was as grateful as a wolf freed from a trap.

"Are there any others in pain in Khinjan?" King asked him.

"Listen to him! What is Khinjan? Is there one man without a wound or a sore or a scar or a sickness?"

"Then, tell them," said King.

The man laughed.

"When I show my jaw, there will be a fight to be first! Make ready, hakim! I go!"

King sat down to eat, but he had not finished his meal—he had made the last little heap of rice into a ball with his fingers, native style, and was mopping up the last of the curried gravy with it—when the advance guard of the lame and the halt and the sick made its appearance. The cave's entrance became jammed with them, and no riot ever made more noise.

"Hakim! Ho, hakim! Where is the hakim who draws teeth? Where is the man who knows yunnal?"

Ten men burst down the passage all together, all clamoring, and one man wasted no time at all but began to tear away bloody bandages to show his wound. King rolled up his sleeves and began, so that eagerness gave place to wonder. The desperate need of winning his first trick, made him horror-proof; and nobody waiting for the next turn was troubled because the man under the knife screamed a little or bled more than usual.

When they died—and more than one did die—men carried them out and flung them over the precipice into the waterfall below.

Ismail and Darya Khan became choosers of the victims. They seized a man, laid him on the bed, tore off his disgusting bandages and held their breath until the awful resulting stench had more or less dispersed. Then King would probe or lance or bandage as he saw fit, using anesthetics when he must, but managing mostly without them.

They almost flung money at him. He tossed money and clothes and every other thing they gave him into a corner at the back of the cave, and nobody tried to steal them back, although a man suspected of honesty in that company would have been tortured to death as an heretic and would have had no sympathy.

For hour after gruesome hour he toiled over wounds and sores such as only battles and evil living can produce, until men began to come at last with fresh wounds, all caused by bullets, wrapped in bandages on which the blood had caked but had not grown fey.

There has been fighting in the Khyber," somebody informed him, and he stopped with lance in midair to listen, scanning a hundred faces swiftly in the smoky lamplight. There were ten men who held lamps for him, one of them a newcomer, and it was he who spoke.

"Fighting in the Khyber? Aye! We

them back into their fort! Aye! We slew many!"

"Not a jihad yet?" King asked, as if the world might be coming to an end. The words were started out of him. Under other circumstances he would never have asked that question so directly; but he had lost reckoning of everything but these poor devils' dreadful need of doctoring, and he was like a man roused out of a dream. If a holy war had been proclaimed already, then he was engaged on a forlorn hope. But the man laughed at him.

"Nay, not yet. Bull-with-a-beard holds back yet. This was a little fight. The jihad shall come later!"

"And who is 'Bull-with-a-beard'?" King wondered; but he did not ask that question because his wits were awake again. It pays not to be in too much of a hurry to know things in the "Hills."

As it happened, he asked no more questions, for there came a shout at the cave entrance whose purport he did not catch, and within five minutes after that, without a word of explanation, the cave was left empty of all except his own five men. They carried away the men too sick to walk and vanished, snatching the last man away almost before King's fingers had finished tying the bandage on his wound.

"Why is that?" he asked Ismail. "Why did they go? Who shouted?"

"It is night," Ismail answered. "It was time."

King stared about him. He had not realized until then that without aid of the lamps he could not see his own hand held out in front of him; his eyes had grown used to the gloom, like those of the surgeons in the sick-bays below the waterline in Nelson's fleet.

"But who shouted?"

"Who knows? There is only one here who gives orders. We be many who obey," said Ismail.

"Whose men were the last ones?" King asked him, trying a new line.

"Bull-with-a-beard's."

"And whose man art thou, Ismail?"

The Afridi hesitated, and when he spoke at last there was not quite the

same assurance in his voice as once there had been.

"I am hers! Be thou hers, too! But it is night. Sleep against the toll tomorrow. There be many sick in Khinjan."

King made a little effort to clean the cave, but the task was hopeless. For one thing he was so weary that his very bones were water. He appointed two-hour watches, to relieve one another until dawn, and flung himself on a clean bed. He was asleep before his head had met the pillow; and for all he knew to the contrary he dreamed of Yasmini all night long.

He dreamed that she came into the cave—she, the woman of the faded photograph the general had given him in Peshawar—and that the cave became filled with the strange intoxicating scent that had first wooed his senses in her reception room in Delhi.

He dreamed that she called him by name. First, "King sahib!" Then "Kurram Khan!" And her voice was surprisingly familiar. But dreams are strange things.

"He sleeps!" said the same voice presently. "It is good that he sleeps!" And in his sleep he thought that a shadowy Ismail grunted an answer.

When he awoke at last it was after dawn, and light shone down the passage into the cave.

"Ismail!" he shouted, for he was thirsty. But there was no answer.

"Darya Khan!"

Again there was no answer. He called each of the other men by name with the same result. He decided to go to the cave mouth, summon his men, who were no doubt sleeping. But there was no Ismail near the entrance—no Darya Khan—nor any of the other men. The horse was gone. So was the mule. So was the harness, and everything he had, except the drugs and instruments and the presents the sick had given him; he had noticed all those lying about in confusion when he woke.

"Ismail!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, thinking they might all be outside.

He heard a man hawk and spit, close to the entrance, and went out to see. A man whom he had never seen before leaned on a magazine rifle and eyed him as a tiger eyes his prey.

"No farther!" he growled, bringing his rifle to the port.

"Why not?" King asked him.

"Allah! When a camel dies in the Khyber do the kites ask why? Go in!"

He thought then of Yasmini's bracelet, that had always gained him at least civility from every man who saw it. He held up his left wrist and knew that outside why it felt uncomfortable. The bracelet had disappeared!

He turned back into the cave to hunt for it, and the strange scent greeted him again. In spite of the surrounding stench of drugs and filthy wounds, there was no mistaking it. If it had been her special scent in Delhi, as Saunders swore it was, and her special scent on the note Darya Khan had carried down the Khyber, then it was hers now, and she had been in the cave.

He hunted high and low and found no bracelet. His pistol was gone, too, and his cartridges, but not the dagger, wrapped in a handkerchief, under his shirt. The money, that his patients had brought him, lay on the floor untouched. It was an unusual robber who had robbed him.

"Who's 'Bull-with-a-beard'?" he wondered. "Nobody interfered with me until I doctored his men. He's in opposition. That's a fair guess. Now, who in thunder—with the fat lord Harry—can 'Bull-with-a-beard' be? And why fighting in the Khyber so early as all this? And why does 'Bull-with-a-beard,' whoever he is, hang back?"

CHAPTER XII.

They came and changed the guard two hours after dawn, to the accompaniment of orders growled through the mist, and the crash of rifle-butts grounding on the rock path. King went to the cave entrance, to look the new man over; he was a Mahsud—no sweeter to look at and no less treacherous for the fact. Also, that he had bolts all over the back of his neck. He was not likely to be better tempered because of that fact, either. But it is an ill wind that blows no good to the secret service.

"There is an end to everything," he remarked presently, addressing the world at large, or as much as he could see of it through the cave mouth. "A hill is so high, a pool so deep, a river so wide. There is an end to pain!"

He went on, adjusting his horn-rimmed spectacles. "I lanced a man's boils last night, and it hurt him, but he must be well today."

"Go in!" growled the guard. "She says it is sorcery! She says none are to let thee touch them!"

"I can heal boils!" said King, retiring into the cave. Then, from a safe distance down the passage, he added a word or two to sink in as the hours went by. At intervals throughout the day Yasmini sent him food by silent messengers. It is not easy to worry and eat heartily at one and the same time. Having eaten, he rolled up his sleeves and native-made cotton trousers and proceeded to clean the cave. After that he overhauled his stock of drugs and instruments, repacking them and making ready against opportunity.

"As I told that leathen with a gun out there, there's an end to everything!" he reflected. "May this come soon!"

The second guard that afternoon proved even less communicative than the first, up to the point when, to lessen his enmity, King began to whistle. Each time he came near the entrance the new guard could catch a few bars of the tune. After a little while the hook-nosed ruffian began to sing the words to it in a voice like a forgotten

dog's. So King stopped at the entrance and saw then a blood-soaked bandage on the right of his neck, not very far from the jugular.

"Hah!" said King. "Was that wound got in the Khyber the other day?"

"Nay, here in Khinjan."

"A man told me last night," said King, drawing on imagination without any compunction at all. "that the fight in the Khyber was because a jihad is launched already."

"That man lied!" said the guard, shifting position uneasily, as if afraid to talk too much.

"So I told him!" answered King. "I told him there never will be another jihad."

"Then thou art a greater liar than he!" the guard answered hotly. "There will be a jihad when she is ready, such an one as never yet was! India shall bleed for all the fat years she has lain unplundered! Not a throat of an unbeliever in the world shall be left unslit! No jihad? Thou liar! Get in out of my sight!"

So King retired into the cave, with something new to think about. Was she planning the jihad! Or pretending to plan one? Every once in a while the guard leaned far into the cave mouth and hurled adjectives at him, the mildest of which was a well of information. If his temper was the temper of the "Hills," it was easy to read disappointment for a jihad that should have been already but had been postponed. King let him alone and paced the cave for hours.

He was squatting on his bed-end in the dark, like a spectacled image of Buddha, when the first of the three men came on guard again and at last Ismail came for him holding a pitchy torch that filled the dim passage full of acrid smoke and made both of them cough. Ismail was red-eyed with it.

"Come!" he growled. "Come, little hakim!" Then he turned on his heel at once, as if afraid of being flouted with desertion. He seemed to want to get outside, where he could keep out of range of words, yet not to wish to seem unfriendly.

But King made no effort to speak to him, following in silence out on to the dark ledge above the waterfall and noticing that the guard with the boils was back again on duty. He grinned evilly out of a shadow as King passed.

"Make an end!" he advised. "Jump, hakim, before a worse thing happens!"

To illustrate the suggestion he kicked a loose stone over the cliff, and the movement caused him to bend his neck and so inadvertently to hurt his boils. He cursed, and there was pity in King's voice when he spoke next.

"Do they hurt thee?"

"Aye, like the devil! Khinjan is a place of plagues!"

"I could heal them," King said, passing on, and the man stared hard.

"Come!" boomed Ismail through the darkness, shaking the torch to make it burn better and beckoning impatiently, and King hurried after him, leaving behind a savage at the cave mouth who fingered his sores and wondered, muttering, leaning on a rifle, muttering and muttering again as if he had seen a new light.

Instead of waiting for King to catch up, Ismail began to lead the way at great speed along a path that descended gradually until it curved round the end of the chasm and plunged into a tunnel where the darkness grew opaque. For thirty minutes he led swiftly down a crazy devil's stairway of uneven boulders, stopping to lend a hand at the worst places, but everlastingly urging him to hurry.

Then the hell-mouth gloom began to grow faintly luminous, and the waterfall's thunder burst on their ears from close at hand. They emerged into fresh wet air and a sea of sound, on a rock ledge like the one above. Ismail raised the torch and waved it. The fire and smoke wandered up, until they flattened on a moving opal dome, that prisoned all the noises in the world.

"Earth's Drink!" he announced, waving the torch and then shutting his mouth tight, as if afraid to voice sacrilege.

It was the river, million-colored in the torchlight, pouring from a half-mile-long slash in the cliff above them and plunging past them through the gloom toward the very middle of the world. Somewhere it met rock bottom and boiled there, for a roar like the sea's came up from depths unimaginable.

He watched the overturning dome until his senses reeled. Then he crawled on hands and knees to the ledge's brink and tried to peer over. But Ismail dragged him back.

"Come!" he howled; but in all that din his shout was like a whisper.

"How deep is it?" King bellowed back.

"Allah! Ask him who made it!"

The fear of the falls was on the Afridi, and he tugged at King's arm in a frenzy of impetuosity. Suddenly he let go and broke into a run. King trotted after him. After ten minutes' hurrying uphill he guessed they must be level with the river, in a tunnel running nearly parallel. Ismail kept looking back to bid King hurry and never paused once to rest.

"Come!" he urged fiercely. "This

leads to the 'Heart of the Hills!' And after that King had to do his best to keep the Afridi's back in sight.

They began after a time to hear voices and to see the smoky glare made by other torches. Then Ismail set the pace yet faster, and they became the last two of a procession of turbaned men, who tramped along a winding tunnel into a great mountain's womb. The sound of slippers clicking and crunching on the rock floor swelled and died and swelled again as the tunnel led from cavern into cavern.

In one great cave they came to every man beat out his torch and tossed it on a heap. After that there was a ledge above the height of a man's head on either side of the tunnel, and along the ledge little oil-burning lamps were spaced at measured intervals. A quarter of a mile farther along there were two sharp turns in the tunnel, and then at last a sea of noise and a veritable blaze of light.

Part of the noise made King feel homesick, for out of the mountain's very womb brayed a music-box, such as the old-time carousals made use of before the days of electricity and steam. It was being worked by inexpert hands, for the time was something jerky; but it was robbed of its tiny meanness and even lent majesty by the hugeness of a cavern's roof, as well as by the crashing, swinging music it played—wild—wonderful—invented for lawless hours and a kingless people.

"Marchons!—Citoyens!"

The procession began to tramp in time to it, and the rock shook. They deployed to left and right into a space

so vast that the eye at first refused to try to measure it. It was the hollow core of a mountain, filled by the sea-sound of a human crowd and hung with huge stalactites that danced and shifted and flung back a thousand colors at the flickering light below. Across the cavern's farther end for a space of two hundred yards the great river rushed, plunging out of a great faagad gap and hurrying out of view down another one, licking smooth banks on its way with a hungry sucking sound.

There were little lamps everywhere, perched on ledges amid the stalactites, and they suffused the whole cavern in golden glow. In the midst of the cavern a great arena had been left bare, and thousands of turbaned men squatted round it in rings. At the end where the river formed a tangent to them the rings were flattened, and at that point they were cut into by the ramp of a bridge, and by a lane left to connect the bridge with the arena. The bridge end formed a nearly square platform, about fourteen feet above the floor, and the broad track thence to the arena, as well as all the arena's boundary, had been marked off by great earthenware lamps, whose greasy smoke streaked up and was lost by the wind among the stalactites.

"Greek lamps, every one of 'em!" King whispered to himself, but he wasted no time just then on trying to explain how Greek lamps had ever got there. There was too much else to watch and wonder at.

No steps led down from the bridge end to the floor; toward the arena it was blind. But from the bridge's farther end across the hurrying water stairs had been hewn out of the rock wall and led up to a hole of twice a man's height, more than fifty feet above water level.

On either side of the bridge end a passage had been left clear to the river edge, and nobody seemed to care to invade it, although it was not marked off in any way. Each passage was about fifty feet wide and quite straight. But the space between the bridge end and the arena, and the arena itself, had to be kept free from trespassers by fifty swaggering ruffians, armed to the teeth.

Every man of the thousands there had a knife in evidence, but the arena guards had magazine rifles as well as Khyber tulwars. Nobody else wore firearms openly. Some of the arena guards bore huge round shields of prehistoric pattern of a size and sort he had never seen before, even in museums. But there was very little that he was seeing that night of a kind that he had seen before anywhere!

The guards lolled insolently, conscious of brute strength and special favor. When any man trespassed with so much as a toe beyond the ring of lamps, a guard would slap his rifle-butt until the swivel rattled, and the of-

ferer would scurry into bowels amid the jeers of any who had seen.

Shoving, kicking and elbowing with set purpose, Ismail forced a way through the already seated crowd and drew King down into the cramped space beside him, close enough to the arena to be able to catch the guards' low laughter. But he was restless. He wished to get nearer yet, only there seemed no room anywhere in front.

Then a guard threw his shield down with a clang and deliberately fired his rifle at the roof. The ricocheting bullet brought down a shower of splintered stone and stalactite, and he grinned as he watched the crowd dodge to avoid it.

Instantly a hundred men rose from different directions and raced for the arena, each with a curved sword in either hand. The yelling changed back into the chant, only louder than before, and by that much more terrible. Cymbals crashed. The music-box resumed its measured grinding of the "Marsellaise." And the hundred began an Afridi sword dance, than which there is nothing wilder in all the world. Its like can only be seen under the shadow of the "Hills."

Ismail seemed obsessed by the spirit of hades let loose—drawn by it, as by a magnet, although subsequent events proved him not to have been altogether without a plan. He got up, with his eyes fixed on the dance, and thrust himself and King next to some Orakzal Pathans, elbowing savagely to right and left to make room. And patience proved scarce. The nearest man reached for the ever-ready Pathan knife, but paused in the instant that his knife licked clear. From a swift side glance at King's face he changed to a full stare, his scowl slowly giving place to a grin as he recognized him.

"Allah!" He drove the long blade back again.

"Well met, hakim! See—the wound heals finely!"

Baring his shoulder under the smelly sheepskin coat, he lifted a bandage gingerly to show the clean opening out of which King had coaxed a bullet the day before. It looked wholesome and ready to heal.

"Name thy reward, hakim! We Orakzal Pathans forget no favors!" (Now that boast was a true one.)

King nodded more to himself than to the other man. He needed, for instance, very much to know who was planning a jihad, and who "Bull-with-a-beard" might be; but it was not safe to confide just yet in a chance-made acquaintance. A very fair acquaintance with some phases of the East had taught him that names such as Bull-with-a-beard are often almost photographically descriptive. He rose to his feet to look. A blind man can talk, but it takes trained eyes to gather information.

The din had increased, and it was safe to stand up and stare, because all eyes were on the madness in the middle. There were plenty besides himself who stood to get a better view, and he had to dodge from side to side to see between them.

"I'm not to doctor his men. Therefore it's a fair guess that he and I are to be kept apart. Therefore he'll be as far away from me now as possible, supposing he's here."

Reasoning along that line, he tried to see the faces on the far side, but the problem was to see over the dancers' heads. He succeeded presently, for the Orakzal Pathan saw what he wanted, and in his anxiety to be agreeable, reached forward to pull back a box from between the ranks in front. Its owners offered instant fight, but made no further objection when they saw who wanted it and why. King wondered at their sudden change of mind.

He found a man soon who was not interested in the dancing, but who had eyes and ears apparently for everything and everybody else. He watched him for ten minutes, until at last their eyes met. Then he sat down and kicked the box back to its owners. He touched the Pathan's broad shoulder. The man smiled and bent his turbaned head to listen.

"Opposite," said King, "nearly exactly opposite—three rows from the front, counting the front row as one—there sits a man with a black beard, whose shoulders are like a bull's. As he sits he hangs his head between them. Look! See! Tell me truly what his name is!"

The Pathan got up and strode forward to stand on the box, kicking aside the elbows that leaned on it and laughing when the owners cursed him. He stood on it and stared for five minutes, counting deliberately three times over, striking a finger on the palm of his hand to check himself.

"Bull-with-a-beard!" he announced at last, dropping back into place beside King. "Muhammad Anim. The mullah Muhammad Anim."

"An Afghan?" King asked.

"He says he is an Afghan. But unless he lies he is from Ishtambou (Constantinople)."

Itching to ask more questions, King—the hakim Kurram Khan—blinked mildly behind his spectacles and looked like one to whom a savage might safely enslave his mind.

"He bade me go to Sikaram where my village is and bring him a hundred men for his lusher. He says he has her special favor. Wait and watch, I say!"

"Has he money?" asked King, apparently drawing a bow at a venture for conversation's sake. But there is an art in asking artless questions.

King witnesses wild doings in the cavern and sees harrowing sights. Yasmini appears, a lovely vision, and the array of fighters go wild with enthusiasm.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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