

KING OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

A Romance of Adventure

By TALBOT MUNDY

CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

King nodded again, for a nod is less committal than a word, and the nod was enough to start the mullah off again.

"I saw the Sleeper and his bride before she knew of either! It was I who let her into Khinjan! It was I who told the men she is the Heart of the Hills, come to life! She tricked me! But this is no hour for bearing grudges. She has a plan and I am inclined to help."

King lay still and looked up at him, sure that treachery was the ultimate end of any plan the mullah Muhammad Anim had. India has been saved by the treachery of her enemies more often than ruined by false friends. So has the world, for that matter.

"A Jihad when the right hour comes will raise the tribes," the mullah growled. "She and thou, as the Sleeper and his mate, could work wonders. But who can trust her? She stole that head! She stole all the ammunition! Does she surely love thee?"

King nodded again, for modesty could not help him at that juncture. Love and boastfulness go together in the "Hills."

"She shall have thee back, then, at a price!"

King did not answer. His brown eyes watched the mullah's, and he drew his breath in little jerks, lest by breathing aloud he should miss one word of what was coming.

"She shall have thee back against Khinjan and the ammunition! She and thou shall have India, but I shall be the power behind you! I have men in Khinjan! I have as many as she! On the day I march there will be a revolt within. She would better agree to terms!"

King lay looking at him, like a prisoner on the rack undergoing examination. He did not answer.

"Write thou a letter. Since she loves thee, state thine own case to her. Tell her that I hold thee hostage, and that Khinjan is mine already for a little fighting. In a month she cannot pick out my men from among her own. Her position is undermined. Tell her that. Tell her that if she obeys she shall have India and be queen. If she disobeys, she shall die in the Cavern of Earth's Drink!"

"She is a proud woman, mullah," answered King. "Threats to such as she—"

The mullah mumbled and strode back and forth three times between King's bed and the fire, with his fists knotted together behind him and his head bent, as Napoleon used to walk. When he stood beside the bed again at last it was with his mind made up, as his clenched fists and his eyes indicated.

"Make thine own terms with her!" he growled. "Write the letter and send it! I hold thee; she holds Khinjan and the ammunition, I am between her and India. So be it. She shall starve in there! She shall lie in there until the war is over and take what terms are offered her in the end! Write thine own letter! State the case, and bid her answer!"

"Very well," said King. He began to see now definitely how India was to be saved. It was none of his business to plan yet, but to help others' plans destroy themselves and to sow such seed in the broken ground as might bear fruit in time.

The mullah left him, to squat and gaze into the fire, and mutter, and King lay still. After a while the mullah went to the mouth of the cave, to stand and stare out at the camp where the thousand fires were dying fitfully and wood smoke purged the air of human nastiness. The stars looked down on him, and he seemed to try to read them, standing with fists knotted together at his back.

And as he stood so, six other mullahs came to him and began to argue with him in low tones, he browbeating them all with furious words, hissed between half-closed teeth. They were whispering still when King fell asleep. It was courage, not carelessness, that let him sleep, courage and a great hope born of the mullah's perplexity.

CHAPTER XX.

Next morning the Orakzal Pathan sat and sunned himself in the cave mouth, emitting worldly wisdom, unadulterated with divinity. As King went toward him to see to whom he spoke he grinned and pointed with his thumb, and King looked down on some sick and wounded men who sat in a crowd together on the ramp, ten feet or so below the cave.

They seemed stout soldierly fellows. Men of another type were being kept at a distance by dint of argument and threats. Away in the distance was Muhammad Anim with his broad back turned to the cave, in altercation with a dozen other mullahs. For the time he was out of the reckoning.

"Some of these are wounded," the Pathan explained. "Some have sores. Some have the bellyache. Then again, some are sick of words, hot and cold by day and night. All have served in the army. All have medals. All are deserters, some for one reason, some for

another and some for no reason at all. Bull-with-a-beard looks the other way. Speak thou to them about the pardon that is offered!"

So King went down among them, taking some of the tools of his supposed trade with him, and trying to crowd down the triumph that would well up. The seed he had sown had multiplied by fifty in a night. He wanted to shout, as men once did before the walls of Jericho. Possibility of pardon and reinstatement, though only heard of at second hand, had brought unity into being. And unity brought eagerness.

"Let us start tonight!" urged one man.

"Nay!" the Pathan objected at once. "Many of you can hardly march. Rest ye here and let the hakim treat your bellyaches. Bull-with-a-beard bade me wait here for a letter that must go to Khinjan today. Good—I will take his letter. And in Khinjan I will spread news about pardons. It is likely there are fifty there who will dare follow me back, and then we shall march down the Khyber like a full company of the old days!"

King got busy with his lancet, but the mullah came back and called him off and drove the crowd away to a distance; then he drove King into the cave in front of him, his mouth working as if he were biting bits of vengeance off for future use.

"Write thy letter, thou! Write thy letter! Here is paper. There is a pen

—take it! Sit! Yonder is ink—tutt-tutt—write, now, write!"

King sat at a box and waited, as if to take dictation, but the mullah, tugging at his beard, grew furious.

"Write thine own letter! Invent thine own argument! Persuade her, or die in a new way! I will invent a new way for thee!"

So King began to write, in Urdu, for reasons of his own. He had spoken once or twice in Urdu to the mullah and had received no answer. It was a fair guess that Muhammad was ignorant of the scholars' language.

"Greeting," he wrote. "To the most beautiful and very wise Princess Yasmin, in her palace in the caves in Khinjan, from her servant Kurram Khan the hakim, in the camp of the mullah Muhammad Anim in the Hills."

"The mullah Muhammad Anim demands the surrender of Khinjan Caves and of all its ammunition. Further, he demands full control of you and of me and of all your men."

"He threatens as a preliminary to blockade Khinjan caves, unless the answer to this prove favorable, letting a rope enter, but calling his own men out to join him. This would suit the Indian government, because while the Hills fight among themselves they cannot raid India, and while he blockades Khinjan caves there will be time to move against him."

"Knowing that he dares begin and cannot accomplish what he threatens, I am sorry because I know it is said how many services you have rendered of old to the government I serve. We who serve one raj are one-one to remember—one to forget—one to help each other in good time."

"It may be that vengeance against me would seem sweeter to you than return to your former allegiance. In that case, Princess, you only need betray me to the mullah, and be sure my death would leave nothing to be desired by the spectators. At present he does not suspect me."

"Be assured, however, that not to betray me to him is to leave me free to serve my government and well able to do so. It is not yet too late to choose. It is not impertinent in me to urge you."

"Nor can I say how gladly I would subscribe myself your grateful and loyal servant."

The mullah pounced on the finished letter, pretended to read it, and watched him seal it up, smiting the hot wax with his own great guarded thumb. Then he shouted for the Orakzal Pathan, who came striding in, all grins and swagger.

"There—take it! Make speed!" he

ordered, and with his rifle at the ready, and the letter tucked inside his shirt, the Pathan favored King with a farewell grin and snarled.

"Get out!" the mullah snarled then immediately. "See to the sick! Let them! I sent thee. Did they be grateful?"

King went. He recognized the almost madness that constituted the mullah's driving power. It is contagious; that madness, until it destroys itself. It had made several thousand men follow him and believe in him, but it had once given Yasmin a chance, to foot him and defeat him, and now it gave King his chance. He let the mullah think himself obeyed implicitly.

He became the busiest man in all the "Hills." While the mullah glowered over the camp from the cave mouth or fluminated from the Quran or fought with other mullahs, with words for weapons and abuse for argument, he bandaged and lanced and poulticed and physicked until his head swam with weariness.

The sick swarmed so around him that he had to leave a bodyguard to keep them at bay; so he chose twenty of the least sick from among those who had talked with the Pathan after sunrise.

And because each of those men had friends, and it is only human to wish one's friend in the same boat, especially when the sea is to speak, is rough, the progress through the camp became a current of missionary zeal and the virtues of the Anglo-Indian raj were better spoken of than the "Hills" had heard for years.

Not that there was any effort made to convert the camp en masse. Far from it. But the likely few were pounced on and were told of a chance to enlist for a bounty in India. And what with winter not so far ahead, and what with experience of former fighting against the British army, the choosing was none so difficult. From the day when the lad first felt soft down upon his face until the old man's beard turns white and his teeth shake out, the hillman would rather fight than eat; but he prefers to fight on the winning side if he may, and he likes good treatment.

Before it was dark that night there were thirty men sworn to hold their tongues and to wait for the word to hurry down the Khyber for the purpose of enlisting in some British-Indian regiment. Some even began to urge the hakim not to wait for the Orakzal Pathan, but to start with what he had.

"Shall I leave my brother in the lurch?" the hakim asked them; and though they murmured, they thought better of him for it.

Well for him that he had plenty of Epsom salts in his kit, for in the "Hills" physic should taste evil and show very quick results to be believed in. He found a dozen diseases of which he did not so much as know the name, but half of the sufferers swore they were cured after the first dose. They would have dubbed him faquir and have foisted him to a pillar of holiness had he cared to let them.

Muhammad Anim slept most of the day, like a great animal that scorns to live by rule. But at evening he came to the cave mouth and fluminated such a sermon as set the whole camp to roaring. He showed his power then. The Jihad he preached would have tempted dead men from their graves to come and share the plunder, and the curses he called down on cowards and laggards and unbelievers were enough to have frightened the dead away again.

In twenty minutes he had undone all King's missionary work. And then in ten more, feeling his power and their response, and being at heart a fool as all rogues are, he built it up again.

He began to make promises too definite. He wanted Khinjan caves. More, he needed them. So he promised them they should all be free of Khinjan caves within a day or two, to come and go and live there at their pleasure. He promised them they should leave their wives and children and belongings safe in the caves while they themselves went down to plunder India. He overlooked the fact that Khinjan caves for centuries had been a secret to be spoken of in whispers, and that prospect of its violation came to them as a shock.

Half of them did not believe him. Such a thing was impossible, and if he were lying as to one point, why not as to all the others, too?

And the army veterans, who had been converted by King's talk of pardons, and almost reconverted by the sermon, shook their heads at the talk of taking Khinjan. Why waste time trying to do what never had been done, with her to reckon against, when a place in the sun was waiting for them down in India, to say nothing of the hope of pardons and clean living for a while? They shook their heads and combed their beards and eyed one another sidewise in a way the "Hills" understand.

That night, while the mullah glowered over the camp like a great old owl, with leaping firelight reflected in his eyes, the thousands under the skin tents argued, so that the night was all noise. But King slept.

All of another day and part of another night he toiled among the sick, wondering when a message would come back. It was nearly midnight when he bandaged his last patient and came out into the starlight to bend his back straight and yawn and pick his way reeling with weariness back to the mullah's cave. He had given his bag of medicines and implements to a man to carry ahead of him and had gone perhaps ten paces into the dark when a strong hand gripped him by the wrist.

"Hush!" said a voice that seemed familiar.

He turned swiftly and looked

straight into the eyes of the Rangar Dewa-Gunga!

"How did you get here?" he asked in English.

"Any fool could learn the password into this camp! Come over here, sahib, I bring word from her!"

The ground was criss-crossed like a man's palm by the shadows of tent-ropes. The Rangar led him to where the tents were forty feet apart and none was likely to overhear them. There he turned like a flash.

"She sends you this," he hissed.

In that same instant King was fighting for his life. In another second they were down together among the tent-pegs, King holding the Rangar's wrist with both hands and struggling to break it, and the Rangar striving for another stroke. The dagger he held had missed King's ribs by so little that his skin yet tingled from its touch. It was a dagger with bronze blade and a gold hilt—her dagger. It was her perfume in the air.

They rolled over and over, breathing hard. King wanted to think before he gave an alarm, and he could not think with that scent in his nostrils and creeping into his lungs. Even in the stress of fighting he wondered how the Rangar's clothes and turban had come to be drenched in it. He admitted to himself afterward that it was nothing else than jealousy that suggested to him to make the Rangar prisoner and hand him over to the mullah.

That would have been a ridiculous thing to do, for it would have forced his own betrayal to the mullah. But as if the Rangar had read his mind, he suddenly redoubled his efforts and King, weary to the point of sickness, had to redouble his own or die. Perhaps the jealousy helped put venom in his effort, for his strength came back to him as a madman's does. The Rangar gave a moan and let the knife fall.

And because jealousy is poison King did the wrong thing then. He pounced on the knife instead of on the Rangar. He could have questioned him—kneel on him and perhaps forced explanations from him. But with a sudden swift effort like a snake's the Rangar freed himself and was up and gone before King could struggle to his feet—gone like a shadow among shadows.

King got up and felt himself all over, for they had fought on stony ground and he was bruised. But bruises faded into nothing, and weariness as well as his mind began to dwell on the new complication to his problem.

It was plain that the moment he had returned from his message to the Khyber the Rangar had been sent on this new murderous mission. Yasmin had never believed her letter would be treated seriously by the authorities, and had only sent it in the hope of fooling him and undermining his determination. Perhaps she saw her own peril. Perhaps she contemplated—gosh! what a contingency!—perhaps she contemplated bolting into India with a story of her own, and leaving the mullah to his own devices! Would she dare escape into India and leave himself alive behind her?

There was an alternative, the very thought of which made him fearfully uneasy, and yet brought a thrill with it. In all Eastern lands, love scorned takes to the dagger. He had half believed her when she swore she loved him! The man who could imagine himself loved by Yasmin and not be thrilled to his core would be inhuman, whatever reason and caution and caste and creed might whisper in imagination's wake.

Reeling from fatigue (he felt like a man who had been racked, for the Rangar's strength was nearly unbelievable), he started toward where the mullah sat glowering in the cave mouth. He found the man who had carried his bag asleep at the foot of the ramp, and taking the bag away from him, let him lie there. And it took him five minutes to drag his hurt, weary bones up the ramp, for the fight had taken more out of him than he had guessed at first.

The mullah glared at him but let him by without a word. It was by the fire at the back of the cave, where he stopped to dip water from the mullah's enormous crock, that the next



DEALON VALENTINE
"Hush!" Said a Voice That Seemed Familiar.

Disturbing factor came to light. He kicked a brand into the fire and the flame leaped. Its light shone on a yard and a half of exquisitely fine hair, like spun gold, that caressed his shoulder and descended down one arm. One thread of hair that conjured up a million thoughts, and in a second upset every argument!

If Rewa Gunga had been near enough to her and intimate enough

with her not only to become scented with her unmistakable perfume but even to get her hair on his person, then gone was all imagination of her love for himself! Then she had lied from first to last! Then she had tried to make him love her, but she might use him, and finding she had failed, she had sent her true love with the dagger to make an end!

In a moment he imagined a whole picture, as it might have been in a crystal, of himself trapped and made to don the Roman's armor and forced to pose to the savage "Hills"—or foisted into posing to them—as her lover, while Rewa Gunga lurked behind the scenes and waited for the harvest in the end. And what kind of harvest?

And what kind of man must Rewa Gunga be who could lightly let go all the prejudices of the East and submit to what only the West has endured hitherto with any complacency—a tertium quid?

Yet what a fool he, King, had been not to appreciate at once that Rewa Gunga must be her lover. Why should he not be? Were they not alike as cousins? And the East does not love its contrary, but its complement, being older in love than the West, and wiser in its ways in all but the material. He had been blind. He had overlooked the obvious—that from first to last her plan had been to set herself and this Rewa Gunga on the throne of India!

He washed and went through the mummery of Muslim prayers for the watchful mullah's sake, and climbed on to his bed. But sleep seemed out of the question. He lay and tossed for an hour, his mind as busy as a terrier in hay. And when he did fall asleep at last it was so to dream and mutter that the mullah came and shook him and preached him a half-hour sermon against the mortal sins that rob men of peaceful slumber by giving them a foretaste of the punishment to come.

All that seemed kinder, and more refreshing than King's own thoughts had been, for when the mullah had done at last and had gone striding back to the cave mouth, he really did fall sound asleep, and it was after dawn when he awoke. The mullah's voice, not unmelodious, was rousing all the valley echoes in the call to prayer.

CHAPTER XXI.

And while King knelt behind the mullah and the whole camp faced Mecca in forehead-in-the-dust abasement there came a strange man down the midst—not strange to the "Hills," where such sights are common, but strange to that camp and hour. Somebody rose and struck him, and he knelt like the rest; but when prayer was over and cooking had begun and the camp became a place of savory smell, he came on again—a blind man. He was clean shaven, and he looked as if he had not been blind long, for his physical health was good.

"Oh, the hakim—the good hakim!" he wailed. "Where is the famous hakim? Show me the way to him! Oh—the famous, great, good hakim who can heal men's eyes!"

"I am he," said King, and he stepped down toward him. The blind man's face looked strangely familiar, though it was partly disguised by some gummy stuff stuck all about the eyes. He stared at the face again.

"Ismail!" he said. "You?"

"Aye! Father of cleverness! Make play of healing my eyes!"

So King made a great show of rubbing on ointment. In a minute Ismail, looking almost like a young man without his great beard, was dancin' like a lunatic, with both fists in the air, and yelling as if he was stung him.

"Aiee-aiee-aiee!" he yelled. "I see again! I see! My eyes have light in them! Allah! Oh Allah—hear riches on the great, wise hakim who can heal men's eyes! Allah reward him richly; for I am a beggar and have no goods!"

The whole camp began to surge toward him to see the miracle, and his chosen bodyguard rushed up to drive them back. And as they went a tall Arab came sliding down the camp with a letter for the mullah held out in a cleft stick in front of him.

"Her answer!" said Ismail with a wicked grin.

"What is her word? Where is the Orakzal Pathan?"

But Ismail laughed and would not answer him. It seemed to King that he sensed climax. Also he chose in that instant to force the mullah's hand, on the principle that hurried buffaloes will blunder.

"To Khinjan!" he shouted to the nearest man. "The mullah will march on Khinjan!"

They murmured and wondered and backed away from him to give him room. Ismail watched him with dropped jaw and wild eye.

"Spread it through the camp that we march on Khinjan! Shout it! Bid them strike the tents!"

Somebody behind took up the shout and it went across the camp in leaps, as men toss a ball. There was a surge toward the tents, but King called to his deserters and they clustered back to him. He had to cement their allegiance now or fall altogether, and he would not be able to do it by ordinary argument or by pleading; he had to fire their imagination. And he did.

"She is on our side!" That was a sheer guess. "She has kept our man and sent another as hostage for him in token of good faith! Listen! Ye saw this man's eyes healed. Let that be a token! Be ye the men with new eyes! Give it out! Claim the title and be true to it and see me guide you down the Khyber in good time like a regiment, many more than a hundred strong!"

They jumped at the idea. The "Hills"—the whole East, for that matter—are ever ready to form a new sect or join a new band or a new blood-

friend. Witness the Nikaisyas, who worship a long-since-dead Englishman. "We see!" called one of them.

"We see!" they chorused, and the idea took charge. From that minute they were a new band, with a war-cry of their own.

"We see!" they howled, scattering through the camp, and the mullah came out to glare at them and put his beard and wonder what possessed them.

"To Khinjan!" they roared. "Lead us to Khinjan!"

"To Khinjan, then," he thundered, throwing up both arms in a sort of



DEALON VALENTINE
"Khinjan is Mine!" He Growled. "India is Mine!"

double apostolic blessing, and then motioning as if he threw them the reins and leave to gallop. They roared back at him like the sea under the whip of a gale wind. And Ismail disappeared among them, leaving King alone. Then the mullah beckoned him and showed him a letter he had crumpled in his fist. There were only a few lines, written in Arabic, which all mullahs are supposed to be able to read, and they were signed with a strange scrawl that might have meant anything. But the paper smelt strongly of her perfume.

Come, then. Bring all your men, and I will let you and them enter Khinjan caves. We will strike a bargain in the Cavern of Earth's Drink.

That was all, but the fire in the mullah's eyes showed that he thought it was enough. He did not doubt that once he should have his extra four thousand in the caves Khinjan would be his; and he said so.

"Khinjan is mine!" he growled. "India is mine!"

King did not answer him. He could only be still and be glad he had set the camp moving and so had forced the mullah's hand. The old fatalist would have suspected her answer otherwise," he told himself, for he knew that he himself suspected it.

While he and the mullah watched the tents began to fall and the women labored to roll them. The men began firing their rifles, and within the hour enough ammunition had been squandered to have fought a good-sized skirmish; but the mullah did not mind, for he had Khinjan caves in view, and none knew better than he what vast store of cartridges and dynamite was piled in there. He let them waste.

Watching his opportunity, King slipped down the ramp and into the crowd, while the mullah was busy with personal belongings in the cave. King left his own belongings to the fates, or to any thief who should care to steal them. He was safe from the mullah in the midst of his nearly eighty men, who half believed him a sending from the skies.

"We see! We see!" they yelled and danced around him.

Before ever the mullah gave an order they got under way and started climbing the steep valley wall. The mullah on his brown mule thrust forward, trying to get in the lead, and King and his men hung back, to keep at a distance from him. Two or three miles along the top of the escarpment the mullah sent back word that he wanted the hakim to be beside him. But King's men treated the messenger to open scorn and sent him packing.

"Bid the mullah hunt himself another hakim!" he then his hakim! Stay, we will give thee a lesson in how to use a knife!"

The man ran, lest they carry out their threat, for men joke grimly in the "Hills."

Ismail came and held King's stirrup, striding beside him with the easy hill-man gait.

"Art thou my man at last?" King asked him, but Ismail laughed and shook his head.

"I am her man."

"Where is she?" King asked.

"Nay, who am I that I should know?"

"But she sent thee?"

"Aye, she sent me."

"To what purpose?"

"To her purpose!" the Arab answered, and King could not get another word out of him. He fell behind.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Superiority. "Women are queer." "Yes?" "Mrs. Twobles has just returned from a trip to New York and merely because she stayed at a hotel with more dining rooms than the hotel usually patronized by Mrs. Tibway on her eastern trips can boast of she's inclined to look down on Mrs. Tibway."

Only when a man is getting the best of it will he admit that he is getting the worst of it.