

King of the Khyber Rifles

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

ADVENTURE AND ROMANCE EXTRAORDINARY

In this remarkable tale Mr. Mundy introduces us to the mysteries and charm of India, and to an interesting people of the Orient about whom the western world knows little or nothing. In the company of Captain Athelstan King, his hero, we go on a wonderful journey in Khinjan caves; and with him we meet Yasmini, an exotic beauty of marvelous fascination. It gives us great pleasure to publish "King of the Khyber Rifles" because we believe our readers will enjoy the serial more than any we have printed in a long time.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

The men who govern India—more power to them and her!—are few. Those who stand in their way and pretend to help them with a flood of words are a host. The charge has been the light in print that India—well-spring of plague and sudden death and money lenders—has sold her soul to twenty succeeding conquerors in turn.

So when the world war broke the world was destined to be surprised on India's account. The Red sea, full of racing transports crowded with dark-skinned gentlemen, whose one prayer was that the war might not be over before they should have struck a blow for Britain, was the Indian army's answer to the press.

More than one nation was deeply shocked by India's answer to "practices" that had extended over years. But there were men in India who learned to love India long ago with that love that casts out fear, who knew exactly what was going to happen and could therefore afford to wait for orders instead of running round in rings. Athelstan King, for instance, nothing yet but a captain unattached, sat in meagerly furnished quarters with his heels on a table. He is not a doctor, yet he read a book on surgery; and when he went over to the club he carried the book under his arm and continued to read it there. In the other room where the telegraph blanks were littered in confusion all about the floor, the other officers sent telegrams and forgot King, who sat and smoked and read about surgery; and before he had nearly finished one box of cheroots a general at Peshawur wiped a bald red skull and sent him an urgent telegram.

"Come at once!" it said simply. King was at Lahore, but miles don't matter when the dogs of war are loosed. The right man goes to the right place at the exact right time then, and the fool goes to the wall. In that one respect war is better than some kinds of peace.

In the train on the way to Peshawur he was not troubled by forced conversation. Consequently he reached Peshawur comfortable, in spite of the heat. And his genial manner of saluting the full-general who met him with a dogcart at Peshawur station was something scandalous. Full-generals, particularly in the early days of war,



"Come at Once," it said.

do not drive to the station to meet captains very often; yet King climbed into the dogcart unexcitedly, after keeping the general waiting while he checked a trunk!

The general cracked his whip without any other comment than a smile. A blood mare tore sparks out of the macadam, and a dusty military road began to ribbon out between the wheels. Sentries in unexpected places announced themselves with a ring of shaken steels as their rifles came to the "present," which courtesies the general noticed with a raised whip. On the dogcart's high front seat, staring straight ahead of him between the horse's ears, King listened. The general did nearly all the talking.

"The North's the danger." King grunted with the lids half-lowered over full, dark eyes. He did not look especially handsome in that attitude. Some men swear he looks like a Roman, and others liken him to a gargoyles, all of them choosing to ignore the smile that can transform his whole face instantly.

"We're defending India of troops—

not keeping back more than a mere handful to hold the tribes in check." King nodded. There has never been peace along the northwest border. It did not need vision to foresee trouble from that quarter. In fact it must have been partly on the strength of some of King's reports that the general was planning now.

"Well, the tribes'll know presently how many men we're sending overseas. There've been rumors about Khinjan by the hundred lately. They're cooking something. Can you imagine 'em keeping quiet now?"

"That depends, sir. Yes, I can imagine it."

The general laughed. "That's why I sent for you. I need a man with imagination! There's a woman you've got to work with on this occasion who can imagine a shade or two too much. What's worse, she's ambitious. So I chose you to work with her."

King's lips stiffened under his mustache, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled into crow's feet to correspond. Eyes are never coal-black, of course, but his looked it at that minute.

"You know we've sent men to Khinjan who are said to have entered the caves. Not one of 'em has ever returned."

King frowned. "She claims she can enter the caves and come out again at pleasure. She has offered to do it, and I have accepted. Can you guess who she is?"

"Not Yasmini?" King hazarded, and the general nodded. The helmet-strap mark, printed indelibly on King's jaw and cheek by the Indian sun, tightened and grew whiter—as the general noted out of the corner of his eye.

"Know her?" "Know of her, of course, sir. Everybody does. Never met her to my knowledge."

"Um-m-m! Whose fault was that? Somebody ought to have seen to that. Go to Delhi now and meet her. I'll send her a wire to say you're coming. She knows I've chosen you. She tried to insist on full discretion, but I overruled her."

King's tongue licked his lips, and his eyes wrinkled. The general's voice became the least shade more authoritative.

"When you see her, get a pass from her that'll take you into Khinjan caves! Ask her for it! For the sake of appearances I'll gazette you seconded to the Khyber rifles. For the sake of success, get a pass from her!"

"Very well, sir."

"You've a brother in the Khyber rifles, haven't you? Was it you or your brother who visited Khinjan once and sent in a report?"

"I did, sir."

He spoke without pride. Even the brigade of British-Indian cavalry that went to Khinjan on the strength of his report and leveled its defenses with the ground, had not been able to find the famous caves. Yet the caves themselves are a byword.

"There's talk of a jihad (holy war). There's worse than that! When you went to Khinjan, what was your chief object?"

"To find the source of the everlasting rumors about the so-called 'Heart of the Hills,' sir."

"Yes, yes. I remember. I read your report. You didn't find anything, did you? Well, the story is now that the 'Heart of the Hills' has come to life. So the spies say."

King whistled softly.

"There's no guessing what it means," said the general. "Go and work with Yasmini. The spies keep bringing in rumors of ten thousand men in Khinjan caves, and of another large lashkar not far away from Khinjan. There must be no jihad, King! India is all but defenseless! This story about a 'Heart of the Hills' coming to life may presage unity of action and a holy war such as the world has not seen. Go up there and stop it if you can. At least, let me know the facts."

King grunted. To stop a holy war single handed would be rather like stopping the wind—possibly easy enough, if one knew the way. Yet he knew no general would throw away a man like himself on a useless venture. He began to look happy.

The general clucked to the mare and one wheel ceased to touch the gravel as they whirled along a semi-circular drive. Under the porch of a pretentious residence, sentries saluted, the sails swung down and in less than sixty seconds King was following the general through a wide entrance into a crowded hall. The in-

stant the general's fat figure darkened the doorway twenty men of higher rank than King, native and English, rose from lined-up chairs and pressed forward.

"Sorry—have to keep you all waiting—busy!" He waved them aside with a little apologetic gesture. "Come in here, King."

King followed him through a door that slammed tight behind him on rubber jambs.

"Sit down!"

The general unlocked a steel drawer and began to rummage among the papers in it. In a minute he produced a package, bound in rubber bands, with a faded photograph face upward on the top.

"That's the woman! How do you like the look of her?"

King took the package and for a minute stared hard at the likeness of a woman whose fame has traveled up and down India, until her witchery has become a proverb. She was



"That's the Woman! How Do You Like the Look of Her?"

dressed as a dancing woman, yet very few dancing women could afford to be dressed as she was.

The general watched his face with eyes that missed nothing.

"Remember—I said work with her!" King looked up and nodded.

"They say she's three parts Russian," said the general. "To my knowledge she speaks Russian like a native, and about twenty other tongues as well, including English. She was the girl widow of a rascally hill rajah. I've heard she loved her rajah. And I've heard she didn't! There's another story that she poisoned him. I know she got away with his money—and that's proof enough of brains! Some say she's a she-devil. I think that's an exaggeration, but bear in mind she's dangerous!"

King grinned. A man who trusts Eastern women over readily does not rise far in the secret service.

"If you've got nous enough to keep on her soft side and use her—not let her use you—you can keep the 'Hills' quiet and the Khyber safe! If you can contrive that—now—in this pinch—there's no limit for you! Commander in chief shall be your job before you're sixty!"

King pocketed the photograph and papers. "I'm well enough content, sir, as things are," he said quietly.

The general paced once across the room and once back again, with hands behind him. Then he stopped in front of King.

"No man in India has a stiffer task than you have now! A jihad launched from the 'Hills' would mean anarchy in the plains. That would entail sending back from France an army that can't be spared. There must be no jihad, King! There must—not be one! Keep that in your head!"

"What arrangements have been made with her, sir?"

"Practically none! She's watching the spies in Delhi, but they're likely to break for the 'Hills' any minute. Then they'll be arrested. When that happens the fate of India may be in your hands and hers! Get out of my way now, until fifteen!"

In a way that some men never learn, King proceeded to efface himself entirely among the crowd in the hall, contriving to say nothing of any account to anybody until the great gong boomed and the general led them all in to his long dining table. Yet he did not look furtive or secretive. Nobody noticed him, and he noticed everybody. There is nothing whatever secretive about that.

The fare was plain, and the meal a perfunctory affair. The general and his guests were there for no other reason than to eat food, and only the man who happened to seat himself next to King—a major by the name of Hyde—spoke to him at all.

"Why aren't you with your regiment?" he asked.

"Because the general asked me to lunch, sir!"

"I suppose you've been pestering him for an appointment!"

King, with his mouth full of curry, did not answer, but his eyes smiled.

After lunch he was closeted with the general again for twenty minutes. Then one of the general's carriages took him to the station; and it did not appear to trouble him at all that the other occupant of the carriage was the self-same Major Hyde, who had sat next him at lunch. In fact, he smiled so pleasantly that Hyde grew exasperated. Neither of them spoke. At the station Hyde lost his temper openly, and King left him abusing an unhappy native servant.

The station was crammed to suffocation by a crowd that roared and writhed and smelt to high heaven. But the general himself had telephoned for King's reservation, so he took his time. There were din and sink and dust beneath a savage sun, shaken into reverberations by the scream of an engine's safety valve. It was India in essence and awake!—India arising out of lethargy!—India as she is more often nowadays—and it made King, for the time being of the Khyber rifles, happier than some other men can be in ballrooms.

Any one who watched him—and there was at least one man who did—must have noticed his strange ability, almost like that of water, to reach the point he aimed for, through, and not around, the crowd.

He neither shoved nor argued. Orders and blows would have been equally useless, for he had tried the crowd could not have obeyed, and it was in no mind to try. Without the least apparent effort he arrived—and there is no other word that quite describes it—arrived. He climbed into his carriage and leaned from the window.

"Why are you here?" asked an acid voice behind him; and without troubling to turn his head, he knew that Major Hyde was to be his carriage mate again.

"Orders," said King.

"Is that your answer?" asked the major. Barked ambition is an ugly horse to ride. He had tried for a command but had been shied.

"I have sufficient authority," said King, unruffled. He spoke as if he were thinking of something entirely different. His eyes were as if they saw the major from a very long way off and rather approved of him on the whole.

"Show me your authority, please!"

King dived into an inner pocket and produced a card that had about ten words written on its face, above a general's signature. Hyde read it and passed it back.

"So you're one of those, are you?" he said in a tone of voice that would start a fight in some parts of the world and in some services. But King nodded cheerfully, and that annoyed the major more than ever; he snorted, closed his mouth with a snap and turned to rearrange the sheet and pillow on his berth.

CHAPTER II.

The train pulled out, amid a din of voices from the left-behind that nearly drowned the panting of the overloaded engine. Hyde all but stripped himself and drew on striped pajamas. King was content to lie in shirt sleeves on the other berth, with knees raised, so that Hyde could not overlook the general's papers. At his case he studied them one by one, memorizing a string of names, with details as to their owners' antecedents and probable present whereabouts. There were several photographs in the packet, and he studied them very carefully indeed.

But much more carefully of all he examined Yasmini's portrait, returning to it again and again. He reached the conclusion in the end that when it was taken she had been cunningly disguised.

"This was intended for purpose of identification at a given time and place," he told himself.

"Were you muttering at me?" asked Hyde.

"No sir. Nothing of the sort intended."

Hyde turned an indignant back on him, and King studied the back as if he found it interesting. On the whole he looked sympathetic, so it was as well that Hyde did not look around. Barked ambition as a rule loathes sympathy.

After many prickly-hot, interminable, jolting hours the train drew up at Rawal-Pindi station. Instantly King was on his feet with his tunic on, and he was out on the blazing hot platform before the train's motion had quite ceased.

He began to walk up and down, not elbowing but percolating through the crowd, missing nothing worth noticing in all the hot kaleidoscope and seeming to find new amazement at every turn. It was not in the least astonishing that a well-dressed native should address him presently, for he looked general enough to be asked to hold a baby. King himself did not seem surprised at all. Far from it; he looked pleased.

"Excuse me, sir," said the man in glib Urdu English. "I am seeking Captain King sahib, for whom my brother is very anxious to be servant. Can

you kindly tell me, sir, where I could find Captain King sahib?"

"Certainly," King answered him. He looked glad to be of help. "Are you traveling on this train?"

The question sounded like politeness welling from the lips of unsuspicion.

"Yes, sir. I am traveling from this place where I have spent a few days, to Bombay, where my business is."

"How did you know King sahib is on the train?" King asked him, smiling so genially that even the police could not have charged him with more than curiosity.

"By telegram, sir. My brother had the misfortune to miss Captain King sahib at Peshawur and therefore sent a telegram to me asking me to do what I can at an interview."

"I see," said King. "I see." And judging by the sparkle in his eyes as he looked away, he could see a lot.

But the native could not see his eyes at that instant, although he tried to. He looked back at the train, giving the man a good chance to study his face in profile.

"See that carriage?" he asked, pointing. "The fourth first-class carriage from the end? Well—there are only two of us in there: I'm Major Hyde, and the other is Captain King. I'll tell Captain King to look out for you."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said the native glibly. "You are most kind! I am your humble servant, sir!"

King nodded good-by to him, his dark eyes in the shadow of the khaki helmet seeming scarcely interested any longer.

"Couldn't you find another berth?" Hyde asked him angrily when he stepped back into the compartment. "What were you out there looking for?"

King smiled back at him blandly. "I think there are railway thieves on the train," he announced without any effort at relevance. He might not have heard the question.

Hyde snorted and returned to his seat in the silence of unspeakable scorn. But presently he opened a suitcase and drew out a repeating pistol which he cocked carefully and stowed beneath his pillow; not at all a contemptible move, because the Indian railway thief is the most resourceful specialist in the world. But King took no overt precautions of any kind.

After more interminable hours night shut down on them, red-hot, black-dark, mesmerically subdivided into seconds by the thump of carriage wheels and lit at intervals by showers of sparks from the gasping engine. Then King, strangely without kicking off his shoes, drew a sheet up over his shoulders. On the opposite berth Hyde covered his head, to keep dust out of his hair, and presently King heard him begin to snore gently. Then, very carefully he adjusted his own position so that his profile lay outlined in the dim light from the gas lamp in the roof. He might almost have been waiting to be shaved. Long after midnight his vigil was rewarded by a slight sound at the door. From that instant his eyes were on the watch, under dark closed lashes; but his even breathing was that of the seventh stage of sleep that knows no dreams.

A click of the door-latch heralded the appearance of a hand. With skill, of the sort that only special training can develop, a man in native dress insinuated himself into the carriage.

"Did you see that runaway?" he asked.

"Ha, sahib. I saw one running. Shall I follow?"

"No. This piece of his shirt will identify him. Take it. Hide it! When a man with a torn shirt, into which that piece fits, makes for the telegraph office after this train has gone on, see that he is allowed to send any telegrams he wants to! Only, have copies of every one of them wired to Captain King, care of the stationmaster, Delhi. Have you understood?"

"Ha, sahib."

"Grab him, and lock him up tight afterward—but not until he has sent his telegrams!"

"Atcha, sahib."

"Make yourself scarce, then!"

Major Hyde was dressed, having performed that military evolution in something less than record time.

"Who was that you were talking to?" he demanded. But King did not seem to understand until the native sergeant had quite vanished into the shadows.

The engine shrieked of death and torment; the heat relaxed as the engine moved—loosened—let go—lifted at last, and a trainload of hot passengers sighed thanks.

"What are you looking at?" Hyde demanded at last, sitting on King's berth.

"Only a knife," said King. He was standing under the dim gas lamp that helped make the darkness more unbearable. He stowed the knife away in his bosom, and the major crossed to his own side.

For about five minutes, while the train swayed headlong into Indian darkness, the man stood listening and watching King's face. He stood so near that King recognized him for the one who had accosted him on Rawal-Pindi platform. And he could see the outline of the knife-hilt that the man's fingers clutched underneath his shirt. He feigned sleep so successfully that the native turned away at last.

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"Thought so!" He dared open his eyes a mite wider. "He's pukka—true to type! Rob first and then kill!"

As he watched, the thief drew the sheet back from Hyde's face, with trained fingers that could have taken spectacles from the victim's nose without his knowledge. Then as fish glide in and out among the reeds without touching them, swift and soft and unseen, his fingers searched Hyde's body. They found nothing.

King moved in his sleep, rather noisily, and the movement knocked a book to the floor from the foot of his berth. The noise of that awake Hyde, and King pretended to begin to wake, yawning and rolling on his back (that being much the safest position an unarmed man can take and much the most awkward for his enemy).

"Thieves!" Hyde yelled at the top of his lungs, groping wildly for his pistol and not finding it.

King sat up and rubbed his eyes. The native drew the knife, and—believing himself in command of the situation—hesitated for one priceless second. He saw his error and darted for the door too late. With a movement unbelievably swift King was there ahead of him; and with another movement not so swift, but much more disconcerting, he threw his sheet as the retreating used to throw a net in ancient Rome. It wrapped round the native's head and arms, and the two went together to the floor in a twisted stranglehold.

In another half-minute the native was groaning, for King had his knife-wrist in two hands and was bending it backward while he pressed the man's stomach with his knees.

The knife fell to the floor, and the thief made a gallant effort to recover it, but King was too strong for him. He seized the knife himself, slipped it in his own bosom and resumed his hold before the native guessed what he was after. The train screamed itself to a standstill at a wayside station, and a man with a lantern began to chant the station's name. The instant the train's motion altogether ceased the heat shut in on them as if the lid of Tophet had been slammed. The prickly heat burst out all over Hyde's skin and King's too.

There was plenty of excuse for relaxing hold, and King made full use of it. A second later he gave a very good pretense of pain in his finger ends as the thief burst free. The native made a dive at his bosom for the knife, but he was frustrated that. Then he made a prodigious effort, just too late, to clutch the man again, and he did succeed in tearing loose a piece of shirt; but the fleeing robber must have wondered, as he bolted into the blacker shadows of the station building, why such an iron-fingered, wide-awake sahib should have made such a truly feeble showing at the end.

"Hang it!—couldn't you hold him? Were you afraid of him, or what?" demanded Hyde, beginning to dress himself. Instead of answering, King leaned out into the lamp-lit gloom, and in a minute he caught sight of a sergeant of native infantry passing down the train. He made a sign that brought the man to him on the run.

"Did you see that runaway?" he asked.

"Ha, sahib. I saw one running. Shall I follow?"

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In Delhi, King meets Rawa Gunga, Yasmini's man, who tells him she has already gone north. In Yasmini's house the captain is given his first test of character.

(TO BE CONTINUED)