

King of the Khyber Rifles

A Romance of Adventure

By TALBOT MUNDY

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THE MYSTERIOUS RANGAR DESERTS CAPT. KING AND HIS CUTTHROAT ESCORT IN A DANGEROUS PART OF KHYBER PASS AND ADVENTURES COME RAPIDLY.

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 Khyber 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. 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.

CHAPTER VI—Continued.

It was not a long journey, nor a very slow one, for there was nothing to block the way except occasional men with flags, who guarded culverts and little bridges. It was low tide under the Himalayas. The flood that was draining India of her armed men had left Jamrud high and dry with a little nondescript force stranded there, as it were, under a British major and some native officers. Frowning over Jamrud were the lean "Hills," peopled by the fiercest fighting men on earth, and the clouds that hung over the Khyber's course were an accent to the savagery.

But King smiled merrily as he jumped out of the train, and Rewa Gunga, who was there to meet him, advanced with outstretched hand and a smile that would have melted snow on the distant peaks if he had only looked the other way.

"Welcome, King sahib!" he laughed, with the air of a skilled fencer who admires another, better one. "I shall know better another time and let you keep in front of me! I trust you had a comfortable journey!"

"Thanks," said King, shaking hands with him, and then turning away to unlock the carriage doors that held his prisoners in. They were baying now like wolves to be free, and yet matters were too jolly well urgent, and we shall have our bally work cut out to catch her, you can bet! But I have everything ready—tents and beds and stores—everything!"

"Nay, ye mountain people: nay!" he laughed. "I, too, am from the plains! What do I know of your families or of your friends? Am I to be torn to pieces to make a meal?"

"At that Ismail interfered, with the aid of an ash pick handle, chance-found beside the trunk. Laughing as if the whole thing was the greatest joke imaginable, Rewa Gunga fell into stride beside King and led him away in the direction of some tents.

"She is up the pass ahead of us," he announced. "She was in the deuce of a hurry, I can assure you. She wanted to wait and meet you, but matters were too jolly well urgent, and we shall have our bally work cut out to catch her, you can bet! But I have everything ready—tents and beds and stores—everything!"

cheroots, and with hands clasped behind him strolled over to the fort to interview Courtenay, the officer commanding.

It so happened that Courtenay had gone up the pass that morning with his shotgun after quail. He came back into view, followed by his little ten-man escort just as King neared the fort, and King timed his approach so as to meet him. The men of the escort were heavily burdened; he could see that from a distance.

"Hello!" he said by the fort gate, cheerily, after he had saluted and the salute had been returned.

"Oh, hello, King! Glad to see you. Heard you were coming, of course. Anything I can do?"

"Tell me anything you know," said King, offering him a cheroot, which the other accepted. As he bit off the end they stood facing each other, so that King could see the oncoming escort and what it carried. Courtenay read his eyes.

"Two of my men!" he said. "Found 'em up the pass. Gazi work, I think. They were cut all to pieces. There's a big lasher gathering somewhere in the 'Hills,' and it might have been done by their skirmishers, but I don't think so."

"Who's supposed to be leading it?"

"Can't find out," said Courtenay. Then he stepped aside to give orders to the escort. They carried the dead bodies into the fort.

"Know anything of Yasmini?" King asked, when the major stood in front of him again.

He drew out his wonderful cigarette case and offered it open to Courtenay, who hesitated, and then helped himself. King refused.

"Major Courtenay has just told me," said King, "that nobody resembling Yasmini has gone up the pass recently. Can you explain?"

"Do you mean, can I explain why the major failed to see her? 'Pon my soul, King sahib, d'you want me to insult the man? Yasmini is too jolly clever for me, or for any other man I ever met; and the major's a man, isn't he? He may pack the Khyber so full of men that there's only standing room and still she'll go up without his leave if she chooses! There is nobody like Yasmini in all the world!"

The Rangar was looking past him, facing the great gorge that lets the north of Asia trickle down into India and back again when weather and the tribes permit. His eyes had become interested in the distance. King wondered why—and looked—and saw. Courtenay saw, too.

"Hail that man and bring him here!" he ordered.

Ismail, keeping his distance with ears and eyes peeled, heard instantly and hurried off. Fifteen minutes later an Afridi stood scowling in front of them with a little letter in a cleft stick in his hand. He held it out and Courtenay took it and sniffed.

"Well—I'll be blessed! A note—sniff-sniff—"on scented paper!" "Sniff-sniff!" "Carried down the Khyber in a split stick! Take it, King—it's addressed to you."

King obeyed and sniffed, too. It smelt of something far more subtle than musk. He recognized the same strange scent that had been wafted from behind Yasmini's silken hangings in her room in Delhi.

"Dear Captain King: Kindly be quick to follow me, because there is much talk of a lasher getting ready for a raid. I shall wait for you in Khyber. Whichever my messenger shall show the way. Please let him keep his rifle. Trust him, and Rewa Gunga and my thirty whom you brought with you. The messenger's name is Darya Kahn. Your servant, Yasmini."

He passed the note to Courtenay, who read it and passed it back.

"I'll find out," the major muttered, "how she got up the pass without my knowing it. Somebody's tail shall be twisted for this!"

But he did not find out until King told him, and that was many days later, when a terrible cloud no longer threatened India from the north.

"Men of the 'Hills!'" he called. "Kuch dar nahin hai!"

"Nahin hai! Hah!" shouted Ismail. "So speaks a man! Hear that, ye mountain folk! He says, 'There is no such thing as fear!'"

In his place in the lead, King whistled softly to himself; but he drew an automatic pistol from its place beneath his armpit and transferred it to a ready position.

Fear or no fear, Khyber mouth is haunted after dark by the men whose blood feuds are too reckless now to let them dare go home and for whom the British hangman very likely waits a mile or two farther south. It is one of the few places in the world where a pistol is better than a thick stick.

Boulder, crag and loose rock faded into gloom behind; in front on both hands ragged hillsides were beginning to close in; and the wind, whose home is in Allah's refuse heap, whistled as it searched busily among the shadow ravines. Then presently the shadow of the thousand-foot-high Khyber walls began to cover them.

After a while King's cheroot went out, and he threw it away. A little later Rewa Gunga threw away his cigarette. After that, the veriest five-year-old among the Zalka Khels, watching sleepless over the rim of some stone watch tower, could have taken oath that the Khyber's unburied dead were prowling in search of empty graves. Probably their unenvy silence was their best protection; but Rewa Gunga chose to break it after a time.

lonely in the 'Hills.' Got any more quail?"

And that was all he ever did say on that subject, then or at any other time.

"What shall you do first after you get up the pass? Call on your brother at Ali Masjid? He's likely to know a lot by the time you get there."

"Not sure," said King. "May and may not. I'd like to see him. Haven't seen the old chap in a donkey's age. How is he?"

"Well two days ago," said Courtenay.

"Here's wishing you luck!" said King. "It's time to go, sir."

He rose, and Courtenay walked with him to where his party waited in the dark, chilled by the cold wind whistling down the Khyber. Rewa Gunga sat, mounted, at their head, and close to him his personal servant rode another horse. Behind them were the mules, and then in a cluster, each with a load of some sort on his head, were the thirty prisoners, and Ismail took charge of them officiously.

Darya Khan, the man who had brought the letter down the pass, kept close to Ismail.

King mounted, and Courtenay shook hands; then he went to Rewa Gunga's side and shook hands with him, too.

"Forward! March!" King ordered, and the little procession started.

"Oh, men of the 'Hills,' ye look like ghosts—like graveyard ghosts!" jeered Courtenay, as they all filed past him. "Ye look like dead men, going to be judged!"

"What now?" asked Ismail, peering up the leather bag that he regarded as his own particular charge.

"Forward!" said King. "Come along!"

He began to set a fairly fast pace. Ismail leading the spare horse and the others towing the mules along. Except for King, who was modern and out of the picture, they looked like Old Testament patriarchs, hurrying out of Egypt, as depicted in the illustrated Bibles of a generation ago—all leaning forward—each man carrying a staff—and none looking to the right or left.

"Forward?" growled Ismail. "With this man it is ever 'forward!' Is there neither rest nor fear? Has she bewitched him? Ha! Ye lazy ones! Ho! Sons of sloth! Urge the mules faster! Beat the led horse!"

So in weird, wan moonlight, King led them forward, straight up the narrowing gorge, between cliffs that seemed to fray the very bosom of the sky. He smoked a cigar and stared at the view, as if he were off to the mountains for a month's sport with dependable shikaris whom he knew.

Nobody could have looked at him and guessed he was not enjoying himself.

"That man," mumbled Ismail behind him, "is not as other sahibs I have known. He is a man, this one! He will do unexpected things!"

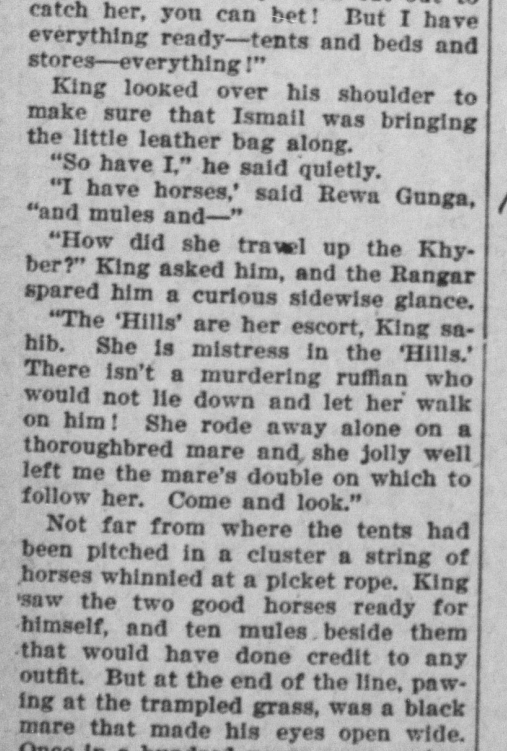
"Forward!" King called to them, thinking they were grumbling. "Forward, men of the 'Hills!'"

CHAPTER VIII.

After a time King urged his horse to a jog-trot, and they trotted forward until the bed of the Khyber began to grow very narrow, and Ali Masjid fort could not be much more than a mile away, at the widest guess. Then King drew rein and dismounted, for he would have been challenged had he ridden much farther. A challenge in the Khyber after dark consists invariably of a volley at short range, with the mere words afterward, and the wise man takes precautions.

"Off with the mules' packs!" he ordered, and the men stood round and stared. Darya Khan, leaning on the only rifle in the party, grinned like a post-office letter box.

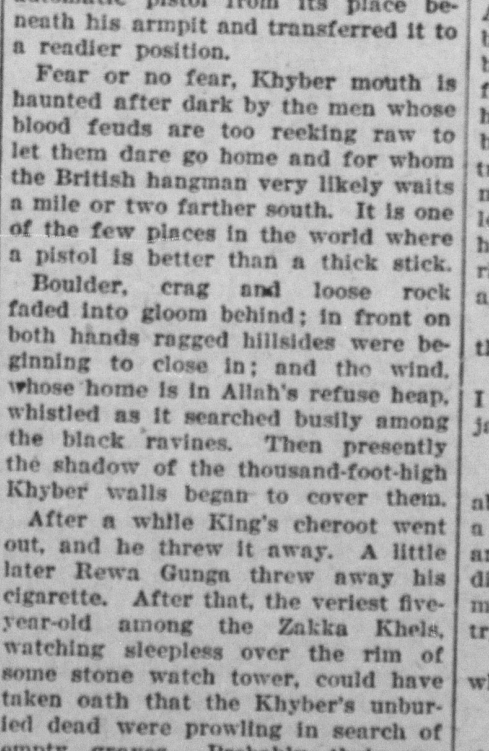
"Truly," growled Ismail, forgetting past expressions of a different opinion, "this man is as mad as all the other Englishmen."



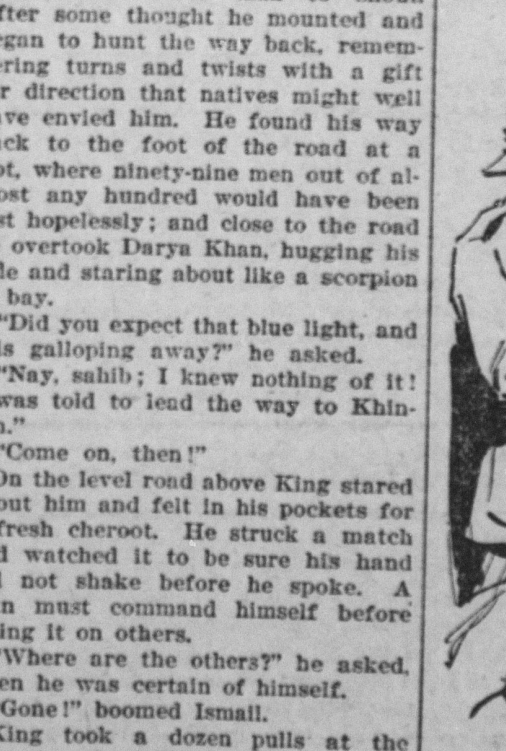
He Recognized the Same Strange Scent That Had Been Wafted From Behind Yasmini's Silken Hangings in Her Room in Delhi.



He Fired Straight at the Blue Light.



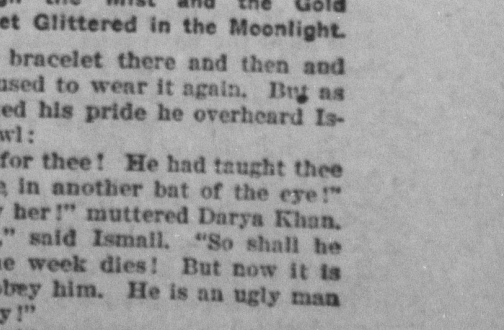
King meets his brother at Ali Masjid fort and they hold a memorable conference. The British captain disappears in the darkness and a strange native medicine man takes his place.



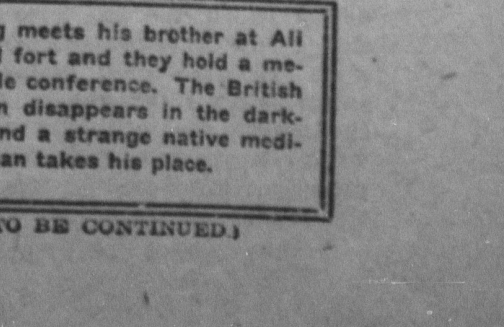
At That Instant the Moon Shone Through the Mist and the Gold Bracelet Glittered in the Moonlight.



King took a dozen pulls at the cheroot and stared about again. In the middle of the road stood his second horse, and three mules with his baggage, including the unmarked medicine chest. Close to them were three men, making the party now only six all told, including Darya Khan, himself and Ismail.



"Gone whither?" Ismail's voice was eloquent of shocked surprise. "They followed! Was it then thy baggage on the other mules? Were they thy men? They led the mules and went!"



"Who ordered them?" "Allah! Need the night be ordered to follow the day?" "And thou?" "I am thy man! She dade xae ba thy man!" "And these?" "Try them!"



King bethought him of his wrist, that was heavy with the weight of gold on it. He drew back his sleeve and held it up.

"May God be with thee!" boomed all five men at once, and the Khyber night gave back their voices, like the echoing of a well. King took his reins and mounted.

(TO BE CONTINUED)