

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

WHEN ISMAIL AND THE OTHERS COMPOSING KING'S GUARD DISCOVER THE CLEVERNESS OF HIS DISGUISE THEY ARE FIRST PUZZLED, THEN DELIGHTED.

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 Gunja, 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.

CHAPTER VIII—Continued.

The packs were laid on the ground, and the mules shook themselves, while the jacksals that haunt the Khyber came closer, to sit in a ring and watch. King dug a flashlight out of one of the packs, gave it to Ismail to hold, sat on the other pack and began to write on a memorandum pad. It was a minute before he could persuade Ismail that the flashlight was harmless, and another minute before he could get him to hold it still. Then, however, he wrote swiftly.

In the Khyber, a mile below you, Dear Old Man—I would like to run in and see you, but circumstances don't permit. Several people sent your regards by me. Herewith go two mules and their packs. Make any use of the mules you like, but store the loads where I can draw on them in case of need. I would like to have a talk with you before taking the rather desperate step I intend, but I don't want to be seen entering or leaving Ali Masjid. Can you come down the pass without making your intention known? It is growing misty now. It ought to be easy. My men will tell you where I am and show you the way. Why not destroy this letter?—Athelstan.

He folded the note and stuck a postage stamp on it in lieu of a seal. Then he examined the packs with the aid of the flashlight, sorted them and ordered two of the mules reloaded. "You three!" he ordered then. "Take the loaded mules into Ali Masjid fort. Take this chit, you. Give it to the sahib in command there."

"To hear is to obey!" said the nearest man. They took the mules' leading reins and before they had gone ten paces were swallowed in the mist that had begun to flow southeastward. The night grew still, except for the whimpering of jacksals. Ismail came nearer and squatted at King's feet. Darya-Khan came closer too. King had tied the reins of the two horses and the one remaining mule together in a knot and was sitting on the pack. Solemn, almost motionless, squatted on their hunkers, they looked like two great vultures watching an animal die.

They sat in silence for five minutes. Then suddenly the two hillmen shuddered, although King did not bat an eyelid. Din burst into being. A volley ripped out of the night and thundered down the pass.

"How-ut! Hukkums dar?" came the insolent challenge half a minute after it—the proof positive that Ali Masjid's guards neither slept nor were afraid. A weird wail answered the challenge, and there began a tossing and fro of words, that was preluded to a shouted invitation:

"Ud-vance-frrennen-orss-werrul!" English can be as weirdly distorted as wire, or any other supple medium, and native levies advance distortion to the point of art; but the language sounds no less good in the chilly gloom of a Khyber night.

Followed another wail, this time of half an hour. Then a man's footsteps—a booted, leather-heeled man, striding carelessly. Not far behind him was the softer noise of sandals. The man began to whistle "Annie Laurie."

"Charles? That you?" called King. "That you, old man?"

A man in khaki stepped into the moonlight. He was so nearly the image of Athelstan King that Ismail and Darya Khan stood up and stared. Athelstan strode to meet him. Their walk was the same. Angle for angle, line for line, they might have been one man and his shadow, except for three quarters of an inch of stature.

"Glad to see you, old man," said Athelstan. "Sure, old chap!" said Charles; and they shook hands. "What's the desperate proposal?" asked the younger.

"I'll tell you when we are alone." His brother nodded and stood a step aside. The three who had taken the note to the fort came closer—partly to call attention to themselves, partly to claim credit, partly because the outer silence frightened them. They elbowed Ismail and Darya Khan, and one of them received a savage blow in the stomach by way of retort from Ismail. Before that spark could start an explosion Athelstan interfered.

He put fingers between his teeth and blew until the night shrilled back at him. Ismail seized the leather bag and started to obey.

"Leave that bag. Leave it, I say!" "But some man may steal it, sahib. How shall a thief know there is no money in it?"

Ismail departed, grumbling, and King turned on Darya Khan. "Take the remaining men and go up the pass!" he ordered. "Stand out of earshot and keep watch. Come when I whistle!"

"But this one has a bellyache where Ismail smote him! Can a man with a bellyache stand guard? His moaning will betray both him and me!" objected "Lord of the Rivers."

"Take him and go!" commanded King.

"But—" King was careful now not to show his bracelet. But there was something in his eye and in his attitude—a subtle, suggestive something—other about him—that was rather more convincing than a pistol or a stick. Darya Khan thrust his rifle's end into the hurt man's stomach for encouragement and started off in the mist.

"Come and ache out of the sahib's sight!" he snarled.

In a minute King and his brother stood unseen, unheard in the shadow by a patch of silver moonlight. Athelstan set down on the mule's pack.

"Well!" said the younger. "Tell me, I shall have to hurry. You see I'm in charge back there. They saw me come out, but I hope to teach 'em a lesson going back."

Athelstan nodded. "Good!" he said. "I've a roving commission. I'm ordered to enter Khinjan caves."

His brother whistled. "Tall order! What's your plan?"

"Haven't one—yet. Know more when I'm nearer Khinjan. You can help no end."

"How? Name it!" "I shall go in disguise. Nobody can put the stain on as well as you. But tell me something first. Any news of a holy war yet?"

His brother nodded. "Plenty of talk about one to come," he said. "We keep hearing of that Inshkar that we can't locate, under a mullah whose name seems to change with the day of the week. And there are everlasting tales about the 'Heart of the Hills.'"

"No explanation of 'em?" Athelstan asked him.

"None! Not a thing!" "D'you know of Yasmini?"

"Heard of her, of course," said his brother. "Has she come up the pass?"

His brother laughed. "No, neither she nor a coach and four." "I have heard she's up the pass ahead of me," said Athelstan.

"She hasn't passed Ali Masjid!" said his brother, and Athelstan nodded.

"Are the Turks in the show yet?" asked Charles.

"Not yet. But I know they're expected in."

"You bet they're expected in!" The young man grinned from ear to ear. "They're working both tides under to prepare the tribes for it. They flatter themselves they can set alight a holy war that will put Timour bang to shame. You should hear my jeezies talk at night when they think I'm not listening!"

"The jeezies'll stand though," said Athelstan.

"Stake my life on it!" said his brother. "They'll stick to the last man!" "I can't tell you," said Athelstan, "why we're not attacking brother Turk before he's ready. But my job is to help make the holy war seem unprofitable to the tribes, so that they'll let the Turk down hard when he calls on 'em. Every day that I can point to forts held strongly in the Khyber is a day in my favor. There are sure to be raids. In fact, the more the merrier, provided they're spasmodic. We must keep 'em separated—keep 'em swarming too fast—while I sow other seeds among 'em."

His brother nodded. Sowing seeds was almost that family's hereditary job. Athelstan continued:

"Hang on to Ali Masjid like a leech, old man! The day one raiding lashkar gets command of the Khyber's throat, the others'll all believe they've won the game. Nothing'll stop 'em!

Look out for traps. Smash 'em on sight. But don't follow up too far!" "Sure," said Charles.

"Help me with the stain now, will you?"

With his flashlight burning as if its battery provided current by the week instead of by the minute, Athelstan dragged open the mule's pack and produced a host of things. He propped a mirror against the pack and squatted in front of it. Then he passed a little bottle to his brother, and Charles attended to the chin-strap mark that would have betrayed him a British officer in any light brighter than dusk. In a few minutes his whole face was darkened to one hue, and Charles stepped back to look at it.

"Won't need to wash yourself for a month!" he snarled. "The dirt won't show!" He sniffed at the bottle. "But that stain won't come off if you do wash—never worry! You'll do finely!"

"Not yet, I won't!" said Athelstan, picking up a little safety razor and beginning on his mustache. In a minute he had his upper lip bare. Then his brother bent over him and rubbed in stain where the scrubby mustache had been.

After that Athelstan unlocked the leather bag that had caused Ismail so much concern and shook out from it a pile of odds and ends at which his brother nodded with perfect understanding. The principal item was a piece of silk—forty or fifty yards of it—that he proceeded to bind into a turban on his head, his brother lending him a guiding, understanding finger at every turn. When that was done, the man who had said he looked in the least like a British officer would have lied.

One after another he drew on native garments, picking them from the pile beside him. So, by rapid stages he developed into a native hakim—by creed a converted Hindu, like Rewa Gunja—one of the men who practice yunani, or modern medicine, without a license and with a very great deal of added superstition, trickery and guesswork.

"I wouldn't trust you with a ha'penny!" announced his brother when he had done. "The part to a T."

"Well—take these into the fort for me, will you?" His brother caught the bundle of discarded European clothes and tucked them under his arm. "Now, remember, old man! We've got to hold the Khyber, and we can't do it by riding pell-mell into the first trap set for us! Be a coward, if that's the name you care to give it. You needn't tell me you've got orders to hunt skirmishers to a standstill, because I know better."

"How d'you know better?" "Never mind! I've been seconded to your crowd. I'm your senior, and I'm giving you orders. Hit hard when you have to, but for God's sake, old man, ware traps!"

"All right," said his brother. "Then good-by, old man!" "Good-by, Athelstan!"

They stood facing and shook hands. Where had been a man and his reflection in the mist, there now seemed to be the same man and a native. Athelstan King had changed his very nature with his clothes. He stood like a native—moved like one; even his voice was changed, as if—like the actor who dyed himself all over to act Othello—he could do nothing by halves.

"By, Charles!" "Officers in that force are not chosen for their clumsiness, or inability to move silently by night. His footsteps died in the mist almost as quickly as his shadow. Before he had been gone a minute the pass was silent as death again, and though Athelstan listened with trained ears, the only sound he could detect was of a jackal cracking a bone fifty or sixty yards away.

CHAPTER IX.

King repacked the loads, putting everything back carefully into the big leather envelopes and locking the empty handbag, after throwing in a few stones for Ismail's benefit. Then he went to sit in the moonlight, with his back to a great rock and waited there cross-legged to give his brother time to make good a retreat through the mist. When there was no more doubt that his own men, at all events, had failed to detect the lieutenant, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

Almost at once he heard sandals come pattering from both directions. As they emerged out of the mist he sat silent and still. It was Darya Khan who came first and stood gaping at him, but Ismail was a very close second, and the other three were only a little behind. For full two minutes after the man with the sore stomach had come they all stood holding one another's arms, astonished. Then—"Our sahib—King sahib—where is he?" asked Ismail.

"Gone!" "Even King's voice was so completely changed that men who had been reared amid mutual suspicion could not recognize it.

"But there are his loads! There's his mule!" "Here is his bag!" said Ismail, pouncing on it, picking it up and shaking it.

"It rattles out as formerly! There is more in it than there was!" "His two horses and the mule are here," said Darya Khan.

"Did I say he took them with him?" asked the hakim, who sat still with his back to a rock. "He went because I came! He left me here in charge! Should he not leave the wherewithal to make one comfortable, since I must do his work? Hah! What do I see? A man bent nearly double? That means a bellyache! Who should have a bellyache when I have potions, lotions, balms to heal all ills, magic charms and talismans, big and little pills—and at such a little price! So small a price! Show me the belly and pay your money! Forget not the money, for nothing is free except air, water and the Word of God! I have paid money for water before now, and where is the mullah who will not take a fee? Nay, only air costs nothing! For a rupee, then—for one rupee I will heal the sore belly and forget to be ashamed for taking such a little fee!"

"Whither went the sahib? Nay—show us proof!" objected Darya Khan; and Ismail stood back a pace to scratch his flowing beard and think.

"The sahib left this with me!" said King, and held up his wrist. The gold bracelet Rewa Gunja had given him gleamed in the pale moonlight.

"May God be with thee!" boomed all five men together.

King jumped to his feet so suddenly that all five gave way in front of him, and Darya Khan brought his rifle to the port.

"Hast thou never seen me before?" he demanded, seizing Ismail by the shoulders and staring straight into his eyes.

"Nay, I never saw thee!" "Look again!" He turned his head, to show his face in profile.

"Nay, I never saw thee!" "Thou! Thou! Thou with the belly! Thou! Thou!" They all denied ever having seen him.

So he stepped back until the moon shone full in his face and pulled off his turban, changing his expression at the same time.

"Now look!" "Ma'uzbillah! (May God protect us!)"

"Now ye know me!" "Hee-ye-ye!" yelled Ismail, hugging himself by the elbows and beginning to dance from side to side. "Hee-ye-ye! What said I? Said I not so? Said I not this is a different man? Said I not this is a good one—a man of unexpected things? Said I not there was magic in the leather bag? I shook it often and the magic grew! Hee-ye-ye! Look at him! See such cunning! Feel him! Smell of him! He is a good one—good!"

Three of the others stood and grinned, now that their first shock of surprise had died away. The fourth man poked among the packs. There was little to see except gleaming teeth and the white of eyes, set in hairy faces in the mist. But Ismail danced all by himself among the stones of Khyber road and he looked like a bearded ghoul out for an airing.

"Hee-ye-ye! She smelt out a good one! Hee-ye-ye! This is a man of it!" said King. "What shall my new name be? Give ye me a name! Khan is a title of respect. Since I wish for respect, I will call myself Khan. Name me a village the first name you can think of—quick!"

"Kurram," said Ismail, at a hazard. "Kurram is good. Kurram I am! Kurram Khan is my name henceforward! Kurram Khan the dakitar!"

"But where is the sahib who came from the fort to talk?" asked the man whose stomach ached yet from Ismail, and Darya Khan's attentions to it.

"Gone!" announced King. "He went with the other one!" "Went whither? Did any see him go?"

"Is that thy affair?" asked King, and the man collapsed. It is not considered wise to the north of Jamrud to argue with a wizard, or even with a man who only claims to be one. This was a man who had changed his very nature almost under their eyes.

"Even his other clothes have gone!" murmured one man, he who had poked about among the packs.

"And now, Ismail, Darya Khan, ye two underheads!—ye bellies without brains!—when was there ever a dakitar—a hakim, who had not two assistants at the least? Have ye never seen, ye blinder-than-bats—how one man holds a patient while his boils are lanced, and yet another makes the hot iron ready?"

"Aye! Aye!" "He had both seen that often."

"Then, what are ye?" They gaped at him. Were they to work wonders too? Were they to be part and parcel of the miracle? Watching him, King saw understanding dawn behind Ismail's eyes and knew he was winning more than a mere admirer. He knew it might be days yet, might be weeks before the truth was out, but it seemed to him that Ismail was at heart his friend. And there are no friendships stronger than those formed in the Khyber and beyond—no more loyal partnerships. The 'Hills' are the home of contrasts, of blood-feuds that last until the last-but-one man dies, and of friendships that no crime or need or slander can efface. If the feuds are to be avoided like the devil, the friendships are worth having.

"There is another thing ye might do," he suggested. "If ye two grown men are afraid to see a boll slit open. Always there are timid patients who hang back and refuse to drink the medicines. There should be one or two among the crowd who will come forward and swallow the draughts eagerly, in proof that no harm results. Be ye two they!"

Ismail spat savagely. "Nay! Bismillah! Nay, nay! I will hold them who have boils, sitting firmly on their bellies—so—or between their shoulders—thus—when the boils are behind! Nay, I will drink no draughts! I am a man, not a cess-pool!"

"And I will study how to heat hot irons!" said Darya Khan, with grim conviction. "It is likely that, having worked for a blacksmith once, I may learn quickly! Phauhghgh! I have tasted medecine! I have drunk Apsin saats (Epsom saats)."

He spat, too, in a very fury of reminiscence. "Good!" said King. "Henceforward, then, I am Kurram Khan, the dakitar, and ye two are my assistants, Ismail to hold the men with boils, and Darya Khan to heat the irons—both of ye to be my men and support me with words when need be!"

"Aye!" said Ismail, quick to think of details, "and these others shall be the tasters!"

"We will not drink the medicines!" announced the man who had a stomach ache. "Nay, nay!"

But Ismail hit him with the back of his hand in the stomach again and danced away, hugging himself and shouting "Hee-ye-ye!" until the jacksals joined him in discontented chorus and the Khyber pass became full of weird howling. Then suddenly the old Afridi thought of something else and came back to thrust his face close to King's.

"Why be a Rangar? Why be a Rajput, sahib? She loves us hillmen better!"

"Do I look like a hillman of the 'Hills'?" asked King.

"Nay, not now. But he who can work one miracle can work another. Change thy skin once more and be a true Hillman!"

"Aye!" King laughed. "And fall heir to a blood-feud with every second man I chance upon! Better be a converted Hindu and be despised by some than have cousins in the 'Hills'! Is that clear, thou on?"

"Aye! Thou art more cunning than any man I ever met!" The great Afridi began to rub the tips of his fingers through his straggly beard in a way that might mean anything, and King seemed to draw considerable satisfaction from it, as if it were a sign language that just then he needed a friend, and he certainly did not propose to refuse such a useful one.

"And," he added, as if it were a

afterthought, instead of his chief reason, "if her special man Rewa Gunja is a Rangar, and is known as a Rangar throughout the 'Hills,' shall I not the more likely win favor by being a Rangar too? If I wear her bracelet and at the same time am a Rangar, who will not trust me?"

"True!" agreed Ismail. "True! Thou art a magician!"

But the moon was getting low and Khyber would be dark again in half an hour, for the great crags in the dis-

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"Kurram Kahn is My Name Henceforward! Kurram Khan the Dakitar!"

tance to either hand shut off more light than do the Khyber walls. The mist, too, was growing thicker. It was time to make a move.

King rose. "Pack the mule and bring my horse!" he ordered and they hurried to obey with alacrity born of new respect, Darya Khan attending to the trimming of the mule's load in person instead of snarling at another man. It was a very different little escort from the one that had come thus far. Like King himself, it had changed its very nature in fifteen minutes!

They brought the horse and King laughed at them, calling them idiots—men without eyes.

"I am Kurram Khan, the dakitar, but who in the 'Hills' would believe it! Look now—look ye and tell me what is wrong?"

He pointed to the horse, and they stood in a row and stared.

"The saddle!" Ismail suggested. "It is a government officer's saddle."

"Stolen!" said King, and they nodded. "Stolen along with the horse!" "Aye!"

"Shorten those stirrups, then, sit holes at the leas! Men will laugh at me if I ride like a British officer!"

"Aye!" said Ismail, hurrying to obey. "Now," he said, gathering the reins and swinging into the saddle, "who knows the way to Khinjan?"

"Which of us does not?" "Ye all know it? Then ye all ara border thieves and worse! No honest man knows that road! Lead on, Darya Khan, thou Lord of Rivers! Forward march!"

So Darya Khan led the way with his rifle, and King's face glowed in cigarette light not very far behind him as he legged his horse up the narrow track that led northward out of the Khyber bed. It would be a long time before he would dare smoke a cigar again, and his supply of cigarettes was destined to dwindle down to nothing before that day. But he did not seem to mind.

"Cheloh!" he called. "Forward, men of the mountains! Kuch dar nahia hal!"

"Thy mother and the spirit of a fight were one!" swore Ismail just in front of him, stepping out like a boy going to a picnic. "She will love thee! Allah! She will love thee! Allah! Allah!"

The thought seemed to appal him. For hours after that he climbed ahead in silence.

Comes the big adventure for King—he arrives at the entrance to Kinjan caves and learns he must prove he has slain an Englishman before the guard will admit him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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In a Few Minutes His Whole Face Was Darkened to One Hue, and Charles Stepped Back to Look at It.