

KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

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CHAPTER VIII.

EVEN with the man with the stomach ache mounted on the spare horse for the sake of extra speed (and he was not suffering one-fifth so much as he pretended); with Ismail to urge, and King to coax, and the fear of mountain death on every side of them, they were the part of a night and a day and a night and a part of another day in reaching Khinjan.

Darya Khan, with the rifle held in both hands, led the way swiftly, but warily; and the last man's eyes looked ever backward, for many a sneaking enemy might have seen them and have judged a stern chase worth while.

In the "Hills" the hunter has all the best of it, and the hunted needs must run. The accepted rule is to stalk one's enemy relentlessly and get him first. King happened to be hunting, although not for human life, and he felt bold, but the men with him dreaded each upstanding crag, that might conceal a rifleman. Armed men behind corners mean only one thing in the "Hills."

The animals grew weary to the verge of dropping, for the "road" had been made for the most part by mountain freshets, and where that was not the case it was imaginary altogether. They traveled upward, along ledges that were age-worn in the limestone—downward where the "hell-stones" slid from under them to almost bottomless ravines, and a false step would have been instant death—up again between big edged boulders, that nipped the mule's pack and let the mule between—past many and many a lonely cairn that hid the bones of a murdered man (buried to keep his ghost from making trouble)—ever with a tortured ridge of rock for skyline, and generally leaning against a wind, that chilled them to the bone, while the fierce sun burned them.

At night and at noon they slept fitfully at the chance-met shrine of some holy man. The "Hills" are full of them, marked by fluttering rags that can be seen for miles away; and though the Quran's meaning must be stretched to find excuse, the Hillmen are adept at stretching things and hold those shrines as sacred as the Book itself. Men who would almost rather cut throats than gamble regard them as sanctuaries.

When a man says he is holy he can find few in the "Hills" to believe him; but when he dies or is tortured to death or shot, even the men who murdered him will come and revere his grave.

Whole villages leave their precious possessions at a shrine before wandering in search of summer pasture. They find them safe on their return, although the "Hills" are the home of the lightest-fingered thieves on earth, who are prouder of villainy than of virtue. A man with a blood-feud, and his foe hard after him, may sleep in safety at a faquir's grave. His foe will wait within range, but he will not draw trigger until the grave is left behind.

So a man may rest in temporary peace even on the road to Khinjan, although Khinjan and peace have nothing whatever in common.

It was at such a shrine, surrounded by tattered rags tied to sticks, that fluttered in the wind three or four thousand feet above Khyber level, that King drew Ismail into conversation, and deftly forced on him the role of questioner.

"How can'st thou see the Caves?" he asked, for King had hinted at his intention; and for answer King gave him a glimpse of the gold bracelet.

"Aye! Well and good! But even she dare not disobey the rule. Khinjan was there before she came, and the rule was there from the beginning, when the first men found the Caves! Some—hundreds—have gained admis-

sion, lacking the right. But who ever saw them again? Allah! I, for one, would not chance it!"

"Thou and I are two men!" answered King. "Allah gave thee qualities I lack. He gave thee the strength of a bull and a mountain goat in one, and her for a mistress. To me he gave other qualities. I shall see the Caves. I am not afraid."

"Aye! He gave thee other gifts indeed! But listen! How many Indian servants of the British Raj have set out to see the Caves? Many, many—aye, very many! Again and again the sarkar sent its loyal ones. Did any return? Not one! Some were crucified before they reached the place. One died slowly on the very rock whereon we sit, with his eyelids missing and his eyes turned to the sun! Some entered Khinjan, and the women of the place made sport with them. Those would rather have been crucified outside had they but known. Some, having got by Khinjan, entered the Caves. None ever came out again!"

"Then, what is my case to thee?" King asked him. "If I can not come out again and there is a secret, then the secret will be kept, and what is the trouble?"

"I love thee," the Afridi answered, simply. "Thou art a man after mine own heart. Turn! Go back before it is too late!"

King shook his head.

"Be warned!"

Ismail reached out a hairy-black hand that shook with half-suppressed emotion.

"When we reach Khinjan, and I come within reach of her orders again, then I am her man, not thine!"

King smiled, glancing again at the gold bracelet on his arm.

"I look like her man, too!"

"Thou!" Ismail's scorn was well feigned if it was not real. "Thou chicken running to the hand that will pluck thy breast-feathers! Listen! Abdurrahman—he of Khabul—and may Allah give his ugly bones no peace!—Abdurrahman of Khabul sought the secret of the Caves. He sent his men to set an ambush. They caught twenty coming out of Khinjan on a raid. The twenty were carried to Khabul, and put to torture there. How many, think you, told the secret under torture? They died cursing Abdurrahman to his face, and he died without the secret! May God recompense him with the fire that burns forever and scalding water and ashes to eat! May rats eat his bones!"

"Had Abdurrahman this?" asked King, touching the bracelet.

"Nay! He would have given one eye for it, but none would trade with him! He knew of it, but never saw it."

"I am more favoured. I have it. It is hers, is it not?" Does not she know the secret?"

"She knows all that any man knows and more!"

"**W**AS she seen to slay a man in the teeth of written law?" asked King, and Ismail stared so hard at him that he laughed.

"I was in Khinjan once before, my friend! I know the rule! I failed to reach the Caves that other time because I had no witnesses to swear they had seen me slay a man in the teeth of written law. I know!"

"Who saw thee this time?" Ismail asked, and began to cackle with the cruel humour of the "Hills," that sees amusement in a man's undoing, or in the destruction of his plans. His humour forced him to explain.

"The price of an entrance has come of late to be the life of an English arrificer! Many an one the English have dubbed Ghazi, because he crossed the border and buried his knife in a man on church parade! They hang and burn them, knowing our Muslim law, that denies Heaven to him who

is hanged and burned. Yet the man they miscall Ghazi sought but the key to Khinjan Caves, with no thought at all about Heaven! Thou art a British arrificer. It may be they will let thee enter the Caves at her bidding. It may be, too, that they will keep thee in a cage there for some chief's son to try his knife on when the time comes to win admission! Listen—man o' my heart!—so strict is the rule that boys born in the Caves, when they come to manhood, must go and slay an Englishman and earn outlawry before they may come back; and lest they prove fearful and betray the secret, ten men follow each. They die by the hand of one or other of the ten unless they have slain their man within two weeks. So the secret has been kept more years than ten men can remember!" (That estimate was doubtless due to a respect for figures and bore no relation to the length of a human generation.)

"Whom did she kill to gain admission?" King asked him, unexpectedly. "Ask her!" said Ismail. "It is her business."

"And thou? Was the life of a British officer the price paid?"

"Nay. I slew a mullah."

THE calmness of the admission, and the satisfaction that its memory seemed to bring the owner made King laugh. He found lawless satisfaction for himself in that Ismail's blood-price should have been a priest, not one of his brother officers. A man does not follow King's profession for health, profit or sentiment's sake, but healthy sentiment remains. The loyalty that drives him, and is its own most great reward, makes him a man to the middle. He liked Ismail. He could not have liked him in the same way if he had known him guilty of English blood, which is only proof, of course, that sentiment and common justice are not one. But sentiment remains. Justice is an ideal.

"Be warned and go back!" urged Ismail.

"Come with me, then."

"Nay, I am her man. She waits for me!"

"I imagine she waits for me!" laughed King. "Forward! We have rested in this place long enough!"

So on they went, climbing and descending the naked ramparts that lead eastward and upward and northward to the Roof of Mother Earth—Ismail ever grumbling into his long beard, and King consumed by a fiercer enthusiasm than ever had yet burned in him.

"Forward! Forward! Cast hounds forward! Forward in any event!" says Cocker. It is only regular generals in command of troops in the field who must keep their rear open for retreat. The Secret Service thinks only of the goal ahead.

It was ten of a blinding forenoon, and the sun had heated up the rocks until it was pain to walk on them and agony to sit, when they topped the last escarpment and came in sight of Khinjan's walls, across a mile-wide rock ravine—Khinjan the unregenerate, that has no other human habitation within a march because none dare build.

They stood on a ridge and leaned against the wind. Beneath them a path like a rope ladder descended in zigzags to the valley that is Khinjan's dry moat; it needed courage as well as imagination to believe that the animals could be guided down it.

"Is there no other way?" asked King. He knew well of one other, but one does not tell all one knows in the "Hills," and there might have been a third way.

"None from this side," said Ismail. "And from the other side?"

"There is a rather better path—that by which the sarkar's troops once came—although it has been greatly obstructed since. It is two days' march from here to reach it. Be

warned a last time, sahib—little hakim—be warned and go back!"

"Thou bird of ill omen!" laughed King. "Must thou croak from every rock we rest on?"

"If I were a bird I would fly away back with thee!" said Ismail.

"Forward, since we can not fly—forward and downward!" King answered. "She must have crossed this valley. Therefore there are things worth while beyond! Forward!"

The animals, weary to death anyhow, fell rather than walked down the track. The men sat and scrambled. And the heat rose up to meet them from the waterless ravine as if its floor were Tophet's lid and the devils busy under it, stoking.

It was mid-day when at last they stood on bottom and swayed like men in a dream fingering their bruises and scarcely able for the heat haze to see the tangled mass of stone towers and mud-and-stone walls that faced them, a mile away. Nobody challenged them yet. Khinjan itself seemed dead, crackled in the heat.

"Sahib, let us mount the hill again and wait for night and a cool breeze!" urged Darya Khan.

Ismail clucked into his beard and spat to wet his lips.

"This glare makes my eyes ache!" he grumbled.

"Wait, sahib! Wait a while!" urged the others.

"Forward!" ordered King. "This must be Tophet. Know ye not that none come out of Tophet by the way they entered in? Forward! The exit is beyond!"

They staggered after him, sheltering their eyes and faces from the glare with turban-ends and odds and ends of clothing. The animals swayed behind them, with hung heads and drooping ears, and neither man nor beast had sense enough left to have detected an ambush. They were more than half-way across the valley, hunting for shadow where none was to be found, when a shot saluted brought them up all-standing in a cluster. Six or eight nickel-coated bullets spat-tered on the rocks close by, and one so narrowly missed King that he could feel its wind.

Up went all their hands together, and they held them so until they ached. Nothing whatever happened. Their arms ceased aching and grew numb.

"Forward!" ordered King.

After another quarter of a mile of stumbling among hot boulders, not one of which was big enough to afford cover, or shelter from the sun, another volley whistled over them. Their hands went up again, and this time King could see turbaned heads above a parapet in front. But nothing further happened.

"Forward!" he ordered.

They advanced another two hundred yards and a third volley rattled among the rocks on either hand, frightening one of the mules so that it stumbled and fell and had to be helped up again. When that was done, and the mule stood trembling, they all faced the wall. But they were too weary to hold their hands up any more. Thirst had begun to exercise its sway. One of the men was half delirious.

"Who are ye?" howled a human being, whose voice was so like a wolf's that the words at first had no meaning. He peered over the parapet, a hundred feet above, with his head so swathed in dirty linen that he looked like a bandaged corpse.

"What will ye? Who comes uninvited into Khinjan?"

KING bethought him of Yasmini's talisman. He held it up, and the gold band glinted in the sun. Yet, although a Hillman's eyes are keener than an eagle's, he did not believe the thing could be recognized at that angle, and from that distance. Another thought suggested itself to him. He turned his head and caught Ismail in the act of signalling with both hands.

"Ye may come!" howled the watchman on the parapet, disappearing instantly.

King trembled—perhaps as a race-horse trembles at the starting gate.