

He could not guess what made it do that, unless it were the suction of the enormous river hurrying underground; and then he remembered that at the entrance air had rushed downward into the hole down which the horse had disappeared, which partly confirmed his guess.

"Ismail!" he shouted, and jumped at the revolver-crack-like echo of his voice.

Ismail came running.

"Make the men carry the mule's packs into this cave. You and Darya Khan stay here and help me open them. Remember, ye are both assistants of Kurram Khan, the hakim!"

"They will laugh at us! They will laugh at us!" chuckled Ismail, but he hurried to obey, while King wondered who would laugh.

Within an hour a delegation came from no less a person than Yasmini herself, bearing her compliments, and hot food savory enough to make a brass idol's mouth water. By that time King had his sets of surgical instruments and drugs and bandages all laid out on one of the beds and covered from view by a blanket.

It was only one more proof of the British army's everlasting luck that one of the men, who set the great brass dish of food on the floor near King, had a swollen cheek, and that he should touch the swelling clumsily as he lifted his hand to shake back a lock of greasy hair.

There followed an oath like flint struck on steel ten times in rapid succession.

"Does it pain thee, brother?" asked Kurram Khan the hakim.

"Are there devils in Tophet! Fire and my veins are one!"

The man did not notice the eagerness beaming out of King's horn-rimmed spectacles, but Ismail did; it seemed to him time to prove his virtues as assistant.

"This is the famous hakim Kurram Khan," he boasted. "He can cure anything, and for a very little fee!"

"Nay, for no fee at all in this case!" said King.

The man looked incredulous, but King drew the covering from his row of instruments and bottles.

"Take a chance!" he advised. "None but the brave wins anything!"

The man sat down, as if he would argue the point at length, but Ismail and Darya Khan were new to the business and enthusiastic. They had him down, held tight on the floor to the huge amusement of the rest, before the man could even protest; and his howls of rage did him no good, for Ismail drove the hilt of a knife between his open jaws to keep them open.

A very large proportion of King's stores consisted of morphia and cocaine. He injected enough cocaine to deaden the man's nerves, and allowed it time to work. Then he drew out three back teeth in quick succession, to make sure he had the right one.

ISMAIL let the victim up, and Darya Khan gave him water in a brass cup. Utterly without pain for the first time for days, the man was as grateful as a wolf freed from a trap.

"Allah reward thee, since the service was free!" he smirked.

"Are there any others in pain in Khinjan?" King asked him.

"Listen to him! What is Khinjan? Is there one man without a wound or a sore or a scar or a sickness?"

"Then, tell them," said King.

The man laughed.

"When I show my jaw, there will be a fight to be first! Make ready, hakim! I go!"

He was true to his word and left the cave like a gust of wind, followed by the three who had come with him.

King sat down to eat, but he had not

finished his meal—he had made the last little heap of rice into a ball with his fingers, native style, and was mopping up the last of the curried gravy with it—when the advance guard of the lame and the halt and the sick made its appearance. The cave's entrance became jammed with them, and no riot ever made more noise.

"Hakim! Ho, hakim! Where is the hakim who draws teeth? Where is the man who knows yunani?"

Ten men burst down the passage all together, all clamouring, and one man wasted no time at all but began to tear away bloody bandages to show his wound. The hardest thing now was to get and keep some kind of order, and for ten minutes Ismail and Darya Khan laboured, using threats where argument failed, and brute force when they dared. It was like beating mad hounds from off their worry. What established order at last was that King rolled up his sleeves and began, so that eagerness gave place to wonder.

The "Hills" are not squeamish in any one particular; so that the fact the cave became a shambles upset nobody. The surgeon's thrill that makes even half amateurs oblivious of all but the work in hand, coupled with the desperate need of winning this first trick, made King horror-proof; and nobody waiting for the next turn was troubled because the man under the knife screamed a little or bled more than usual.

When they died—and more than one did die—men carried them out and flung them over the precipice into the waterfall below.

Ismail and Darya Khan became choosers of the victims. They seized a man, laid him on the bed, tore off his disgusting bandages and held their breath until the awful resulting stench had more or less dispersed. Then King would probe or lance or bandage as he saw fit, using anaesthetics when he must, but managing mostly without them.

THEY almost flung money at him.

Few of them asked what his fee would be. Those who had no money brought him shawls, and swords, and even clothing. Two or three brought old-fashioned fire-arms; but they were men who did not expect to live. And King accepted every gift without comment, because that was in keeping with the part he played. He tossed money and clothes and every other thing they gave him into a corner at the back of the cave, and nobody tried to steal them back, although a man suspected of honesty in that company would have been tortured to death as an heretic and would have had no sympathy.

For hour after gruesome hour he toiled over wounds and sores such as only battles and evil living can produce, until men began to come at last with fresh wounds, all caused by bullets, wrapped in bandages on which the blood had caked but had not grown foul.

"There has been fighting in the Khyber," somebody informed him, and he stopped with lancet in mid-air to listen, scanning a hundred faces swiftly in the smoky lamplight. There were ten men who held lamps for him, one of them a newcomer, and it was he who spoke.

"Fighting in the Khyber! Aye! We were a little lashkar, but we drove them back into their fort! Aye! we slew many!"

"Not a jihad yet?" King asked, as if the world might be coming to an end. The words were startled out of him. Under other circumstances he would never have asked that question so directly; but he had lost reckoning of everything but these poor

devils' dreadful need of doctoring, and he was like a man roused out of a dream. If a holy war had been proclaimed already, then he was engaged on a forlorn hope. But the man laughed at him.

"Nay, not yet. Bull-with-a-beard holds back yet. This was a little fight. The jihad shall come later!"

"And who is 'Bull-with-a-beard'?" King wondered; but he did not ask that question because his wits were awake again. It pays not to be in too much of a hurry to know things in the "Hills."

As it happened, he asked no more questions, for there came a shout at the cave entrance whose purport he did not catch, and within five minutes after that, without a word of explanation, the cave was left empty of all except his own five men. They carried away the men too sick to walk and vanished, snatching the last man away almost before King's fingers had finished tying the bandage on his wound.

"Why is that?" he asked Ismail.

"Why did they go? Who shouted?"

"It is night," Ismail answered. "It was time."

King stared about him. He had not realized until then that without aid of the lamps he could not see his own hand held out in front of him; his eyes had grown used to the gloom, like those of the surgeons in the sick-bays below the water line in Nelson's fleet.

"But who shouted?"

"Who knows? There is only one here who gives orders. We be many who obey," said Ismail.

"Whose men were the last ones?"

King asked him, trying a new line.

"Bull-with-a-beard's."

"And whose man art thou, Ismail?"

The Afridi hesitated, and when he spoke at last there was not quite the same assurance in his voice as once there had been.

"I am hers! Be thou hers, too! But it is night. Sleep against the toil to-morrow. There be many sick in Khinjan."

KING made a little effort to clean the cave, but the task was hopeless. For one thing he was so weary that his very bones were water; for another, Ismail pretended to be equally tired, and when the suggestion that they should help was put to the others they claimed their izzat indignantly.

Izzat and sharm (honour and shame) are the two scarcely distinguishable enemies of honest work, into whose teeth it takes both nerve and resolution to drive a Hillman at the best of times. Nerve King had, but his resolution was asleep. He was too tired to care.

He appointed them to two-hour watches, to relieve one another until dawn, and flung himself on a clean bed. He was asleep before his head had met the pillow; and for all he knew to the contrary he dreamed of Yasmini all night long.

It seemed to him that she came into the cave—she, the woman of the faded photograph the general had given him in Peshawar—and that the cave became filled with the strange intoxicating scent that had first wooed his senses in her reception room in Delhi.

He dreamed that she called him by name. First, "King sahib!" Then, "Kurram Khan!" And her voice was surprisingly familiar. But dreams are strange things.

"He sleeps!" said the same voice presently. "It is good that he sleeps!" And in his sleep he thought that a shadowy Ismail grunted an answer.

After that he was very sure in his dream that it was good to sleep, although a voice he did not recognize and that he was quite sure was a dream-voice, kept whispering to him to wake up and protect himself.

But the scent grew stronger, and he began to dream of cobras, that danced with a woman and struck at her so swiftly that she had to become two women in order to avoid them; and Rewa Gunga came and laughed at both and called them amateurs, so that the woman became enraged and drew a bronze-bladed dagger with a golden hilt.

Then intelligible dreams ceased altogether, and he slept like a dead man, but with a vague suggestion ever with him that Yasmini was not very far away, and that she was interested in him to a point that was actually embarrassing. It was like the ether-dream he once dreamt in a hospital.

When he awoke at last it was after dawn, and light shone down the passage into his cave.

"Ismail!" he shouted, for he was thirsty. But there was no answer.

"Darya Khan!"

Again there was no answer. He called each of the other men by name with the same result.

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