

# KING—OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

“W HOD take all that stuff to Europe, where they make it?” he reflected. “And what ‘u’d they use camel harness for in France?”

At his leisure—in his own way, that was devious and like a string of miracles—he filtered toward the telegraph office. The native who had followed him all this time drew closer, but he did not let himself be troubled by that.

He whispered proof of his identity to the telegraph clerk, who was a Royal Engineer, new to that job that morning, and a sealed telegram was handed to him at once. The “shadow” came very close indeed, presumably to try and read over his shoulder from behind, but he side-stepped into a corner and read the telegram with his back to the wall.

It was in English, no doubt to escape suspicion; and because it was war-time, and the censorship had closed on India like a throttling string, it was not in code. So the wording, all things considered, had to be ingenious, for the Mirza Ali, of the Fort, Bombay, to whom it was addressed, could scarcely be expected to read more than between the lines. The lines had to be there to read between.

“Cattle intended for slaughter,” it ran, “despatched Bombay on Fourteen down. Meet train. Will be inspected en route, but should be dealt with carefully on arrival. Cattle inclined to stampede owing to bad scare received to North of Delhi. Take all precautions and notify Abdul.” It was signed “Suliman.”

“Good!” he chuckled. “Let’s hope we get Abdul, too. I wonder who he is!”

Still uninterested in the man who shadowed him, he walked back to the office window and wrote two telegrams; one to Bombay, ordering the arrest of Ali Mirza of the Fort, with an urgent admonition to discover who his man Abdul might be, and to seize him as soon as found; the other to the station in the north, insisting on close confinement for Suliman.

“Don’t let him out on any terms at all!” he wired.

That being all the urgent business, he turned leisurely to face his shadow, and the native met his eyes with the engaging frankness of an old friend, coming forward with outstretched hand. They did not shake hands, for King knew better than to fall into the first trap offered him. But the man made a signal with his fingers that is known to not more than a dozen men in all the world, and that changed the situation altogether.

“Walk with me,” said King, and the man fell into stride beside him.

He was a Ranger—which is to say a Rajput who, or whose ancestors had turned Mohammedan. Like many Rajputs, he was not a big man, but he looked fit and wiry; his head scarcely came above the level of King’s chin, although his turban distracted attention from the fact. The turban was of silk and unusually large.

The whitest of well-kept teeth, gleaming regularly under a little black waxed mustache, betrayed no trace of betel-nut or other nastiness, and neither his fine features nor his eyes suggested vice of the sort that often undermines the character of Rajput youth.

On second thoughts, and at the next opportunity to see them, King was not so sure that the eyes were brown, and he changed his opinion about their colour a dozen times within the hour. Once he would even have sworn they were green.

The man was well-to-do, for his turban was of costly silk, and he was clad in expensive Jodpur riding breeches and spurred black riding boots, all perfectly immaculate. The breeches, baggy above and tight below, suggested the clean lines of cat-like agility and strength.

THE upper part of his costume was semi-European. He was a regular Rangar dandy, of the type that can be seen playing polo almost any day at Mount Abu—that gets into mischief with a grace due to practice and heredity—but that does not manage its estates too well, as a rule, nor pay its debts in a hurry.

“My name is Rewa Gunga,” he said, in a low voice, looking up sidewise at King a shade too guilelessly. Between Cape Comorin and the Northern Ice guile is normal, and its absence makes the wise suspicious.

“I am Captain King.”

“I have a message for you.”

## A New Serial Story

### A Tale of Daring and Deep Intrigue in India During the Great War---and how a Captain Encountered the Famed Yasmini, in the Very Shadow of the Himalayas

By TALBOT MUNDY

“From whom?”

“From her!” said the Rangar, and without exactly knowing why, or being pleased with himself, King felt excited.

They were walking toward the station exit. King had a trunk check in his hand, but returned it to his pocket, not proposing just yet to let the Rangar overhear instructions regarding the trunk’s destination; he was too good-looking and too overbrimming with personal charm to be trusted thus early in the game. Besides, there was that captured knife, that hinted at lies and treachery. Secret signs as well as loot have been stolen before now.

“I’d like to walk through the streets and see the crowd.”

He smiled as he said that, knowing well that the average young Rajput of good birth would rather fight a tiger with cold steel than walk a mile or two. He drew fire at once.

“Why walk, King sahib? Are we animals? There is a carriage waiting—her carriage—and a coachman whose ears were born dead. We might be overheard in the street. Are you and I children, tossing stones into a pool to watch the rings widen!”

“Lead on, then,” answered King.

Outside the station was a luxuriously modern victoria, with C springs and rubber tires, with horses that would have done credit to a viceroy. The Rangar motioned King to get in first, and the moment they were both seated the Rajput coachman set the horses to going like the wind. Rewa Gunga opened a jeweled cigarette case.

“Will you have one?” he asked, with the air of royalty entertaining a blood-equal.

KING accepted a cigarette for politeness’ sake and took occasion to admire the man’s slender wrist, that was doubtless hard and strong as woven steel, but was not much more than half the thickness of his own.

The Rajputs as a race are proud of their wrists and hands. Their swords are made with a hilt so small that none save a Rajput of the blood could possibly use one; yet there is no race in all warring India, nor any in the world, that bears a finer record for hard fighting and sheer derring-do. One of the questions that occurred to King that minute was why this well-bred youngster whose age he guessed at twenty-two or so had not turned his attention to the army.

“My height!”

The man had read his thoughts!

“Not quite tall enough. Besides—you are a soldier, are you not? And do you fight?”

He nodded toward a dozen water-buffaloes, that slouched along the street with wet goatskin mussuks slung on their blue flanks.

“They can fight,” he said, smiling. “So can any other fool!” Then, after a minute of rather strained silence: “My message is from her.”

“From Yasmini?”

“Who else?”

King accepted the rebuke with a little inclination of the head. He spoke as little as possible, because he was puzzled. He had become conscious of a puzzled look in the Rangar’s eyes—of a subtle wonderment that might be intentional flattery (for Art and the East are one). Whenever the East is doubtful, and recognizes doubt, it is as dangerous as a hillside in the rains, and it only added to his problem if the Rangar found in him something inexplicable. The West can only get the better of the East when the East is too cock-sure.

“She has jolly well gone North!” said the Rangar, suddenly, and King shut his teeth with a snap. He sat bolt upright, and the Rangar allowed himself to look amused.

“When? Why?”

“She was too jolly well excited to wait, sahib!”

She is of the North, you know. She loves the North, and the men of the ‘Hills’; and she knows them because she loves them. There came a tar (telegram) from Peshawur, from a general, to say King sahib comes to Delhi; but already she had completed all arrangements here. She was in a great stew, I can assure you. Finally she said, ‘Why should I wait?’ Nobody could answer her.”

HE spoke English well enough. Few educated foreign gentlemen could have spoken it better, although there

was the tendency to use slang that well-bred natives insist on picking up from British officers; and as he went on, here and there the native idiom crept through, translated. King said nothing, but listened and watched, puzzled more than he would have cared to admit by the look in the Rangar’s eyes. It was not suspicion—nor respect. Yet there was a suggestion of both.

“At last she said, ‘It is well; I will not wait!’ I know of this sahib. He is a man whose feet stand under him and he will not tread my growing flowers into garbage! He will be clever enough to pick up the end of the thread that I shall leave behind and follow it and me! He is a true hound, with a nose that reads the wind, or the general sahib never would have sent him!”—so she left me behind, sahib, to—present to you the end of the thread of which she spoke.”

King tossed away the stump of the cigarette and rolled his tongue round the butt of a fresh cheroot. The word “hound” is not necessarily a compliment in any of a thousand Eastern tongues and gains little by translation. It might have been a slip, but the East takes advantage of its own slips as well as of other peoples’ unless watched.

The carriage swayed at high speed round three sharp corners in succession before the Rangar spoke again.

“She has often heard of you,” he said then. That was not unlikely but not necessarily true, either. If it were true, it did not help to account for the puzzled look in the Rangar’s eyes, that increased rather than diminished.

“I’ve heard of her,” said King.

“Of course! Who has not? She has desired to meet you, sahib, ever since she was told you are the best man in your service.”

King grunted, thinking of the knife beneath his shirt.

“She is very glad that you and she are on the same errand.” He leaned forward for the sake of emphasis and laid a finger on King’s hand. It was a delicate, dainty finger with an almond nail. “She is very glad. She is far more glad than you imagine, or than you would believe. King sahib, she is all bucked up about it! Listen—her web is wide! Her agents are here—there—everywhere, and she is obeyed as few kings have ever been! Those agents shall all be held answerable for your life, sahib—for she has said so! They are one and all your body-guard, from now forward!”

King inclined his head politely, but the weight of the knife inside his shirt did not encourage credulity. True, it might not be Yasmini’s knife, and the Rangar’s emphatic assurance might not be an unintentional admission that the man who had tried to use it was Yasmini’s man. But when a man has formed the habit of deduction, he deduces as he goes along, and is prone to believe what his instinct tells him.

AGAIN, it was as if the Rangar read a part of his thoughts, if not all of them. It is not difficult to counter that trick, but to do it a man must be on his guard, or the East will know what he has thought and what he is going to think, as many have discovered when it was too late.

“Her men are able to protect anybody’s life from any God’s number of assassins, whatever may lead you to think the contrary. From now forward your life is in her men’s keeping!”

“Very good of her, I’m sure,” King murmured. He was thinking of the general’s express order to apply for a “passport” that would take him into Khinjan Caves—mentally cursing the necessity for asking any kind of favour—and wondering whether to ask this man for it or wait until he should meet Yasmini. He had about made up his mind that to wait would be quite within a strict interpretation of his orders,