

KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

By TALBOT MUNDY

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CHAPTER XIII.

TELLING the story afterward King never made any effort to describe his own sensations. It was surely enough to state what he saw, after a breathless climb among the rat-runs of a mountain with his imagination fired already by what had happened in the Cavern of Earth's Drink.

The leather curtains slipped through his fingers and closed behind him with the clash of rings on a rod. But he was beyond being startled. He was not really sure he was in the world. He knew he was awake, and he knew

he was glad he had left his shoes outside. But he was not certain whether it was the twentieth century, or fifty-five B. C., or earlier yet; or whether time had ceased. Very vividly in that minute there flashed before his mind Mark Twain's suggestion of the Transposition of Epochs.

The place where he was did not look like a cave, but a palace chamber, for the rock walls had been trimmed square and polished smooth; then they had been painted pure white, except for a wide blue frieze, with a line of gold-leaf drawn underneath it. And on the frieze, done in gold-leaf too,

was the Grecian lady of the lamps, always dancing. There were fifty or sixty figures of her, no two the same.

A dozen lamps were burning, set in niches cut in the walls at measured intervals. They were exactly like the two outside, except that their horn chimneys were stained yellow instead of red, suffusing everything in a golden glow.

Opposite him was a curtain, rather like that through which he had entered. Near to the curtain was a bed, whose great wooden posts were cracked with age. And it was at the bed he stared, with eyes that took in every detail but refused to believe.

In spite of its age it was spread with fine new linen. Richly embroidered, not very ancient Indian draperies hung down from it to the floor on either side. On it, above the linen, a man and a woman lay hand-in-hand; and the woman was so exactly like Yasmini, even to her clothing and her naked feet, that it was not possible for a man to be self-possessed.

They both seemed asleep. It was as if Yasmini, weary from the dancing, had laid herself to sleep beside her lord. But who was he? And why did he wear Roman armour? And why was there no guard to keep intruders out?

It was minutes before he satisfied himself that the man's breast did not rise and fall under the bronze armour and that the woman's jewelled gauzy stuff was still. Imagination played such tricks with him that in the stillness he imagined he heard breathing.

After he was sure they were both dead, he went nearer, but it was a minute yet before he knew the woman was not she. At first a wild thought possessed him that she had killed herself.

The only thing to show who he had been were the letters S. P. Q. R. on a great plumed helmet, on a little table by the bed. But she was the woman of the lamp-bowls and the frieze. A life-size stone statue in a corner was so like her, and like Yasmini too, that it was difficult to decide which of the two it represented.

She had lived when he did, for her fingers were locked in his. And he had lived two thousand years ago, because his armour was about as old as that, and for proof that he had died in it part of his breast had turned to powder inside the breastplate. The rest

of his body was whole and perfectly preserved.

Stern, handsome in a high-beaked Roman way, gray on the temples, firm-lipped, he lay like an emperor in harness. But the pride and resolution on his face were outdone by the serenity of hers. Very surely those two had been lovers.

Something—he could not decide what—about the man's appearance kept him staring for ten minutes, holding his breath unconsciously and letting it out in little silent gasps. It annoyed him that he could not pin down the elusive thing; and when he went on presently to be curious about more tangible things, it was only to be faced with the unexplainable at every turn.

How had the bodies been preserved, for instance? They were perfect, except for that one detail of the man's breast. The air was full of the perfume he had learned to recognize as Yasmini's, but there was no sniff about the bodies of pitch or bitumen, or of any other chemical. Nor was there any sign of violence about them, or means of telling how they died, or when, except for the probable date of the man's armour.

Both of them looked young and healthy—the woman younger than thirty—twenty-five at a guess—and the man perhaps forty, perhaps forty-five.

He bent over them. Every stitch of the man's clothing had decayed in the course of centuries, so that his armour rested on the naked skin, except for a dressed leather kilt about his middle. The leather was as old as the curtains at the entrance, and as well preserved.

But the woman's silken clothing was as new as the bedding; and that was so new that it had been woven in Belfast, Ireland, by machinery and bore the mark of the firm that made it!

Yet, they both died at about the same time, or how could their fingers have been interlaced? And some of the jewellery on the woman's clothes was very ancient as well as priceless.

He looked closer at the fingers for signs of force and suddenly caught his breath. Under the woman's flimsy sleeve was a wrought gold bracelet, smaller than that one he himself had worn in Delhi and up the Khyber—exactly like the little one that Yasmini wore on her wrist in the Cavern of Earth's Drink! He raised the loose sleeve to look more closely at it.

The sleeve overlay the man's forearm, and the movement laid bare another bracelet, on the man's right wrist. Size for size, this was the same as the one that had been stolen from himself.

Memory prompted him. He felt its

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