

# KING—OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

By TALBOT MUNDY

Copyright 1916 by Bobbs-Merrill Co. Canadian rights held by Canadian Courier.

"**W**HERE are the bombs? And the rifles? And the many cartridges?" he demanded. "We have waited long, Muhammad Anim. Where are they now?"

The others got up, to lend the first man encouragement. They leaned on rifles and surrounded the mullah, so that King could only get a glimpse of him between them. They seemed in no mood to be treated cavalierly—in no mood to be argued with. And the mullah did not argue.

"Ye dogs!" he growled at them, and he strode through them to the fire and chose himself a good, thick burning brand. "Ye sons of nameless mothers!"

Then he charged them suddenly, beating them over head and face and shoulders, driving them in front of him, utterly reckless of their rifles. His own rifle lay on the ground behind him, and King kicked its stock clear of the fire.

"Oh, I shall pray for you this night!" Muhammad Anim snarled. "What a curse I shall beg for you! Oh, what a burning of the bowels ye shall have! What a sickness! What running of the eyes! What sores! What boils! What sleepless nights and faithless women shall be yours! What a prayer I will pray to Allah!"

They scattered into outer gloom before his rage, and then came back to kneel to him and beg him withdraw his curse. He kicked them as they knelt and drove them away again. Then, silhouetted in the cave mouth, with the glow of the fire behind him, he stood with folded arms and dared them shoot. He lacked little in that minute of being a full-grown brute at bay. King admired him, with reservations.

After five minutes of angry contemplation of the camp he turned on a contemptuous heel and came back to the fire, throwing on more fuel from a great pile in a corner. There was an iron pot in the embers. He seized a stick and stirred the contents furiously, then set the pot between his knees and ate like an animal. He passed the pot to King when he had finished, but fingers had passed too many times through what was left in it and the very thought of eating the mess made his gorge rise; so King thanked him and set the pot aside.

Then, "That is thy place!" Muhammad Anim growled, pointing over his shoulder to a ledge of rock, like a shelf in the far wall. There was a bed upon it of cotton blankets stuffed with dry grass. King walked over and felt the blankets and found them warm from the last man who had lain there. They smelt of him, too. He lifted them and laughed. Taking the whole in both hands he carried it to the fire and threw it in, and the sudden blaze made the mullah draw away a yard; but it did not make him speak.

"Rings!" King explained, but the mullah showed no interest. He watched, however, as King went back to the bed, and subsequent proceedings seemed to fascinate him.

Out of the chest that one of the women had set down King took soap. There was a pitcher of water between him and the fire; he carried it nearer. With an improvised scrubbing brush of twigs he proceeded to scrub every inch of the rock-shelf, and when he had done and had dried it more or less, he stripped and began to scrub himself.

"Who taught thee thy squeamishness?" the mullah asked at last, get-

ting up and coming nearer. It was well that King's skin was dark (although it was many shades lighter than his face, that had been stained so carefully). The mullah eyed him from head to foot and looked awfully suspicious, but something prompted King and he answered without an instant's hesitation.

"Why ask a woman's questions?" he retorted. "Only women ask when they know the answer. When I watched thee with the firebrand a short while ago, oh, mullah, I mistook thee for a man."

The mullah grunted and began to tug his beard. But King said no more and went on washing himself.

"I forgot," said the mullah then, "that thou art her pet. She would not love thee unless thy smell was sweet."

"No," said King, quite cheerfully—going it blind, for he did not know what had possessed him to take that line, but knew he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb—"No, if I stank like thee she would not love me."

The mullah snorted and went back to the fire, but he took King's cake of soap with him and sat examining it.

"Taubah!" he swore suddenly, as if he had made a gruesome discovery. "Such filthy stuff is made from the fat of pigs!"

"Doubtless!" said King. "That is why she uses it, and why I use it. She is a better Muhammadan than thou. She would surely cleanse her skin with the fat of pigs!"

"Thou art a shameless one!" said the mullah, shaking his head like a bear.

"I am what Allah made me!" answered King, and then, for the sake of the impression, he went through the outward form of muslim prayer, spreading a mat and omitting none of the genuflections. When he had finished he unfolded his own blankets that a woman had thrown down beside the chest and spread them carefully on the rock-shelf. But though he was allowed to climb up and lie there, he was not allowed to sleep—nor did he want to sleep—for more than an hour to come.

The mullah came over from the fire again and stood beside him, glaring like a great animal and grumbling in his beard.

"Does she surely love thee?" he asked at last, and King nodded, because he knew he was on the trail of information.

"So thou art to ape the Sleeper in his bronze mail, eh? Thou art to come to life, as she was said to come to life, and the two of you are to plunder India. Is that it?"

KING nodded again, for a nod is less committal than a word; and the nod was enough to start the mullah off again.

"I saw the Sleeper and his bride before she knew of either! It was I who let her into Khinjan! It was I who told the men she is the 'Heart of the Hills' come to life! She tricked me! But this is no hour for bearing grudges. She has a plan and I am minded to help."

King lay still and looked up at him, sure that treachery was the ultimate end of any plan the mullah Muhammad Anim had. India has been saved by the treachery of her enemies more often than ruined by false friends. So has the world, for that matter.

"A jihad when the right hour comes will raise the tribes," the mullah growled. "She and thou, as the Sleeper and his mate, could work wonders. But who can trust her? She stole that head! She stole all the ammunition! Does she surely love thee?"

King nodded again, for modesty could not help him at that juncture. Love and boastfulness go together in the "Hills."

"She shall have thee back, then, at a price!"

King did not answer. His brown eyes watched the mullah's, and he drew his breath in little jerks, lest by breathing aloud he should miss one word of what was coming.

"She shall have thee back against Khinjan and the ammunition! She and thou shall have India, but I shall be the power behind you! She must give me Khinjan and the ammunition! She must admit me to the inner caves, whence her damned guards expelled me. I must have the reins in my two hands, so! Then, thou and she shall have the pomp and glitter while I guide!"

King did not answer.

"Dost understand?"

King murmured something unintelligible.

"Otherwise, I and my men will storm Khinjan, and she and thou shall go down into Earth's Drink lashed together!"

King shuddered, not because he felt afraid, but because some instinct told him to make the mullah think him afraid. He was far too interested to be fearful.

"**Y**E shall both be tortured before the plunge into the river! She shall be tortured in the Cavern of Earth's Drink before the men!"

King shuddered again, this time without an effort. He could imagine the thousands watching grimly while the flayer used his knife.

"I have men in Khinjan! I have as many as she! On the day I march there will be a revolt within. She would better agree to terms!"

King lay looking at him, like a prisoner on the rack undergoing examination. He did not answer.

"Write thou a letter. Since she loves thee, state thine own case to her. Tell her that I hold thee hostage, and that Khinjan is mine already for a little fighting. In a month she can not pick out my men from among her own. Her position is undermined. Tell her that. Tell her that if she obeys she shall have India and be queen. If she disobeys, she shall die in the Cavern of Earth's Drink!"

"She is a proud woman, mullah," answered King. "Threats to such as she—?"

The mullah mumbled and strode back and forth three times between King's bed and the fire, with his fists knotted together behind him and his head bent, as Napoleon used to walk. When he stood beside the bed again at last it was with his mind made up, as his clenched fists and his eyes indicated.

"Make thine own terms with her!" he growled. "Write the letter and send it! I hold thee; she holds Khinjan and the ammunition. I am between her and India. So be it. She shall starve in there! She shall lie in there until the war is over and take what terms are offered her in the end! Write thine own letter! State the

case, and bid her answer!"

"Very well," said King. He began to see now definitely how India was to be saved. It was none of his business to plan yet, but to help others' plans destroy themselves and to sow such seed in the broken ground as might bear fruit in time.

The mullah left him, to squat and gaze into the fire, and mutter, and King lay still. After a while the mullah went and carried a great water bowl nearer to the fire and, as King had done, stripped himself. Then he heaped great fagots on the fire—wasteful fagots, each of which had cost some women hours of mountain climbing. And in the glow of the leaping flame he scrubbed himself from head to foot with King's soap. Finally, with a feat of strength that nearly forced an exclamation out of King, he lifted the great water bowl in both hands and emptied the whole contents over himself. Then he resumed his smelly garments without troubling to dry his body, and got out a Quran from a corner and began to read it in a nasal singsong that would have kept dead men awake. King lay and watched and listened.

Reading scripture only seemed to fire the mullah's veins. For him sleep was either out of reach or despicable, perhaps both. He seemed in a mood to despise anything but conquest and strode back and forth up and down the cave like a caged bear, muttering to himself.

After a time he went to the mouth of the cave, to stand and stare out at the camp where the thousand fires were dying fitfully and wood smoke purged the air of human nastiness. The stars looked down on him, and he seemed to try to read them, standing with fists knotted together at his back.

And as he stood so, six other mullahs came to him and began to argue with him in low tones, he browbeating them all with furious words hissed between half-closed teeth. They were whispering still when King fell asleep. It was courage, not carelessness, that let him sleep—courage and a great hope born of the mullah's perplexity.

He dreamed that he was writing, writing, writing, while the torturers made a hot fire ready in the Cavern of Earth's Drink and whetted knives on the bridge end while the organ played The Marseillaise. He dreamed Yasmini came to him and whispered the solution to it all, but what she whispered he could not catch, although she whispered the same words again and again and seemed to be angry with him for not listening.

And when he awoke at last he had fragments of his blanket in either hand, and the sun was already shining into the jaws of the cave. The camp was alive and reeked of cooking food. But the mullah was gone, and so was all the money the women had brought, together with his medicines and things from Khinjan.

## CHAPTER XVII.

**I**NSTEAD of the mullah, growling texts out of a Quran on his lap, the Orakzai Pathan sat and sunned himself in the cave mouth, emitting worldlier wisdom unadulterated with divinity. As King went toward him to see to whom he spoke he grinned and pointed with his thumb, and King looked down on some sick and wounded men who sat in a crowd together on the ramp, ten feet or so below the cave.

They seemed stout, soldierly fellows. Men of another type were being kept at a distance by dint of argument