

doubt that once he should have his extra four thousand in the caves Khinjan would be his; and he said so.

"Khinjan is mine!" he growled. "India is mine!"

And King did not answer him. He did not believe Yasmini would be fool enough to trust herself in any bargain with Muhammad Anim. Yet he could see no alternative as yet. He could only be still and be glad he had set the camp moving and so had forced the mullah's hand.

"The old fatalist would have suspected her answer otherwise!" he told himself, for he knew that he himself suspected it.

While he and the mullah watched the tents began to fall and the women laboured to roll them. The men began firing their rifles, and within the hour enough ammunition had been squandered to have fought a good-sized skirmish; but the mullah did not mind, for he had Khinjan Caves in view, and none knew better than he what vast store of cartridges and dynamite was piled in there. He let them waste.

Watching his opportunity, King slipped down the ramp and into the crowd, while the mullah was busy with personal belongings in the cave. King left his own belongings to the fates, or to any thief who should care to steal them. He was safe from the mullah in the midst of his nearly eighty men, who half believed him a sending from the skies.

"We see! We see!" they yelled and danced around him.

BEFORE ever the mullah gave an order they got under way and started climbing the steep valley wall.

The mullah on his brown mule thrust forward, trying to get in the lead, and King and his men hung back, to keep at a distance from him. It was when the mullah had reached the top of the slope and was not far from being in the lead that Ismail appeared again, leading King's horse, that he had found in possession of another man. That did not look like enmity or treachery. King mounted and thanked him. Ismail wiped his knife, that had blood on it, and stuck his tongue through his teeth, which did not look quite like treachery either. Yet the Afridi could not be got to say a word.

Two or three miles along the top of the escarpment the mullah sent back word that he wanted the hakim to be beside him. Doubtless he had looked back and had seen King on the horse, head and shoulders above the baggage.

But King's men treated the messenger to open scorn and sent him packing.

"Bid the mullah hunt himself another hakim! Be thou his hakim! Stay, we will give thee a lesson in how to use a knife!"

The man ran, lest they carry out their threat, for men joke grimly in the "Hills."

Ismail came and held King's stirrup, striding beside him with the easy Hillman gait.

"Art thou my man at last?" King asked him, but Ismail laughed and shook his head.

"I am her man."

"Where is she?" King asked.

"Nay, who am I that I should know?"

"But she sent thee?"

"Aye, she sent me."

"To what purpose?"

"To her purpose!" the Afridi answered, and King could not get another word out of him. He fell behind.

But out of the corner of his eye, and once or twice by looking back deliberately, King saw that Ismail was taking the members of his new band one by one and whispered to them. What he said was a mystery, but as they talked each man looked at King. And the more they talked the better pleased they seemed. And as the day wore on the more deferential they grew. By mid-day if King wanted to dismount there were three at least to hold his stirrup and ten to help him mount again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOUR thousand men with women and children and baggage do not move so swiftly as one man or a dozen, especially in the "Hills," where discipline is reckoned beneath a proud man's honour. There were many miles to go before Khinjan when night fell and the mullah bade them camp. He bade them camp because they would have done it otherwise in any case.

"And we," said King to his all but eighty who crowded around him, "being men with new eyes and with a great new hope in us, will halt here and eat the evening meal and watch for an opportunity."

"Opportunity for what?" they asked him.

"An opportunity to show how Allah loves the brave!" said King, and they had to be content with that, for he would say no more to them. Seeing he would not talk, they made their little fires all around him and watched while their women cooked the food. The mullah would not let them eat until he and the whole camp had prayed like the only righteous.

When the evening meal was eaten, the sentries had been set at every vantage point, and the men all sat about cleansing their beards and fingers the mullah sent for the hakim again. Only this time he sent twenty men to fetch him.

There was so nearly a fight that the skin all down King's back was gooseflesh, for a fight at that juncture would have ruined everything. At the least he would have been made a hopeless, helpless prisoner. But in the end the mullah's men drew off snarling, and before they could have time to receive new orders or reinforcements, King's die was cast.

There came another order from the mullah. The women and children were to be left in camp next dawn, and to remain there until sent for. There was murmuring at that around the camp, and especially among King's contingent. But King laughed.

"It is good!" he said.

"Why? How so?" they asked him.

"Bid your women make for the Khyber soon after the mullah marches to-morrow. Bid them travel down the Khyber until we and they meet!"

"But—"

"Please yourselves, sahibs!" The hakim's air was one of supremest indifference. "As for me, I leave no women behind me in the mountains. I am content."

They murmured a while, but they gave the orders to their women, and King watched the women nod. And all that while Ismail watched him with carefully disguised concern, but undisguised interest. And King understood. Enlightenment comes to a man swiftly, when it does come, as a rule.

He recalled that Yasmini had not done much to make his first entry into

Khinjan easy. On the contrary, she had put him on his mettle and had set Rewa Gunga to the task of frightening him and had tested him and tried him before tempting him at last.

She must be watching him now, for even the East repeats itself. She had sent Ismail for that purpose. It might be Ismail's business to drive a knife in him at the first opportunity, but he doubted that. It was much more likely that, having failed in an attempt to have him murdered, she was superstitiously remorseful. Her course would depend on his. If he failed, she was done with him. If he succeeded in establishing a strong position of his own, she would yield.

All of which did not explain Ismail's whisperings and noddings and chin strokings with King's contingent. But it explained enough for King's present purpose, and he wasted no time on riders to the problem. With or without Ismail's aid, with or without his enmity, he must control his eighty men and give the slip to the mullah, and he went at once about the best way to do both.

"We will go now," he said, quietly. "That sentry in yonder shadow has his back turned. He has over-eaten. We will rush him and put good running between us and the mullah."

Surprised into obedience, and too delighted at the prospect of action to wonder why they should obey a hakim so, they slung on their bandoliers and made ready. Ismail brought up King's horse and he mounted. And then, at King's word, all eighty made a sudden swoop on the drowsy sentry and took him unawares. They tossed him over the cliff, too startled to scream an alarm; and though sentries on either hand heard them and shouted, they were gone into outer darkness like wind-blown ghosts of dead men before the mullah even knew what was happening.

They did not halt until not one of them could run another yard, King trusting to his horse to find a footing along the cliff-tops, and to the men to find the way.

"Whither?" one whispered to him.

"To Khinjan!" he answered; and that was enough. Each whispered to the other, and they all became fired with curiosity more potent than money bribes.

When he halted at last and dismounted and sat down and the stragglers caught up, panting, they held a council of war all together, with Ismail sitting at King's back and leaning a chin on his shoulder in order to hear better. Bone pressed on bone, and the place grew numb; King shook him off a dozen times; but each time Ismail set his chin back on the same spot, as a dog will that listens to his master. Yet he insisted he was her man, and not King's.

"Now, ye men of the Hills," said King, "listen to me who am political-offender - with - reward - for - capture-offered!" That was a gem of a title. It fired their imaginations. "I know things that no soldier would find out in a thousand years, and I will tell you some of what I know."

NOW, he had to be careful. If he were to invent too much they might denounce him as a traitor to the "Hills" in general. If he were to tell them too little they would lose interest and might very well desert him at the first pinch. He must feel for the middle way and upset no prejudices.

"She has discovered that this mullah Muhammad Anim is no true muslim, but an unbelieving dog of a foreigner from Farangistan! She has discovered that he plans to make himself an emperor in these Hills, and to sell Hillmen into slavery!" Might as



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