

KING—OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued.)

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At the end of perhaps three minutes that section of the wall had become the fourth side of a twenty-foot-wide island that stood fair in the middle of a tunnel, splitting it in two to right and left. Judging by the angle of the two divisions they became one again before going very far.

The mullah stood aside and motioned King to enter. But the one-eyed guide who had led them to the mosque thrust himself between Darya Khan and Ismail, pushed King aside and took the lead.

"Nay!" he said, "I am responsible to her."

It was the first time he had spoken and he appeared to resent the waste of words.

The tunnel that led to the left was pierced in twenty places in the roof for rifle-fire; a score of men with enough ammunition could have held it forever against an army. But the right-hand way looked undefended. Nevertheless, the guide led to the left, and King followed him, filled with curiosity.

"Many have entered!" sang the lashless mullah in a sing-song chant. "More have sought to enter! Some who remained without were wisest! I count them! I keep count! Many went in! Not all came out again by this road!"

"Then there is another road?" King wondered, but he held his tongue and followed the guide.

It proved to be fifty yards through part natural, part hand-hewn, tunnel to the neck of the fork where the left- and right-hand passages became one again. He stopped at the fork and looked back, for none of his men was following.

He caught the sound of scuffling—of clattering hoofs, and grunts and shouted oaths—and started to run back, since even a native hakim may protect his own, should he care to, even in the "Hills."

For the sake of principle he chose the other passage, for Cocker says, "Look! Look! Look!" But the guide seized him by the arm from behind and swung him back again.

"Not that way!" he growled. But he offered no explanation.

In the "Hills" it is not good to ask "why" of strangers. It is good to be glad one was not knifed, and to be deferent until more suitable occasion. King started to run again, but this time along the same defended passage down which they had come. And now the guide made no objection but leaned on his long gun and waited.

The charger proved to be making the trouble—the horse that King had exchanged with the jezailchi in the Khyber. The terrified brute was refusing to enter the passage, and all the men, including Ismail and the mullah, were shoving, or else tugging at the reins.

At the moment King appeared the united strength of six men was beginning to prevail. The mullah let go the reins, and in that instant the horse saw King advance toward him out of the tunnel; so, after the manner of horses, he chose the other passage. King ran at full speed round the corner after him, remembering that the guide had admitted responsibility, and therefore that the chances were he would be rescued should he run into a trap.

Suddenly, ten yards in the lead down the dark tunnel the horse threw his weight back with a clatter of sparks and screamed as only a horse can. After that there was neither sight nor sound of him.

Creeping forward with both arms outstretched against the left-hand wall,

he reached the spot where the horse had been, and shuddered on the smooth dark edge of a hole that went the full width of the floor. There came whispering up out of it, and a dank wet smell, as if there were running water a mile away below. He could feel that a little air flowed downward into it. Twenty yards away on the far side the path resumed, but there was neither hand nor foothold on the smooth damp walls between. He went back to his men with a shiver between his shoulder-blades, and the mullah, standing in the gap of the mosque wall, blinked at him with lashless eyes.

"Many have entered," he chanted maliciously. "Some went out by a different road!"

"Come!" Ismail growled at the other men, seizing the mule's bridle himself and leading to the left. "The ghosts will have a charger now for their captain to ride! Lead on, hakim sahib!"

"Come!" called the one-eyed guide from the neck of the fork ahead. And as they all pressed forward after King the hairless mullah gave a signal and the great stone door slid slowly into place. It was like a tombstone. It was as if the world that mortals know were a thing of the forgotten past and the underworld lay ahead.

"Lead along, Charon!" King grinned. He needed some sort of pleasantries to steady his nerves. But even so he wondered what the nerves of India would be like if her millions knew of this place.

CHAPTER IX.

THE second gap closed up behind them and the tunnel began to echo weirdly. The mule was the next to be panic-stricken. The noise of his plunging increased the echoes a thousand times and multiplied his fright, until the poor brute collapsed into meek obedience at last. But the guide strode on unconcerned with his easy Hillman gait, neither deigning to glance back nor making any verbal comment.

Over their heads, at irregular intervals, there were holes that if they led as King presumed into caves above, left not an inch of all the long passage that could not have been swept by rifle-fire. It was impregnable; for no artillery heavy enough to pound the mountain into pieces could ever be dragged within range. Whatever hiding place this entrance guarded could be held forever, given food and cartridges!

The tunnel wound to right and left like a snake, growing lighter and lighter after each bend; and soon their own din began to be swallowed in a greater one that entered from the farther end. After two sharp turns they came out unexpectedly into the blaze of blue day, nearly stunned by light and sound. A roar came up from below like that of an ocean in the grip of a typhoon.

When his wits recovered from the shock, King struggled with a wild desire to yell, for before him was what no servant of British India had ever seen and lived to tell about, and that is an experience more potent than unbroken rum.

They had emerged from a round-mouthed tunnel—it looked already like a rabbit-hole, so huge was the cliff behind—on to a ledge of rock that formed a sort of road along one side of a mile-wide chasm. Above him, it seemed a mile up, was blue sky, to which limestone walls ran sheer, with scarcely a foothold that could be seen.

Beneath, so deep that eyes could not guess how deep, yawned the stained gorge of the underworld, many-coloured, smooth and wet.

And out of a great, jagged slit in the side of the cliff, perhaps a thousand feet below them, there poured down into thunderous dimness a waterfall whose breadth seemed not less than half a mile. It spouted seventy or eighty yards before it began to curve, and its din was like the voice of all creation.

Ismail came and stood by King in silence, taking his hand, as a little child might. Presently he stooped and picked up a stone and tossed it over.

"Gone!" he said simply. "That down there is Earth's Drink!"

"And this is the 'Heart of the Hills' men boast about?"

"Nay! It is not!" snapped Ismail.

"Then, where—"

But the one-eyed guide beckoned impatiently, and King led the way after him, staring as hakim or prisoner or any man had right to do on first admission to such wonders. Not to have stared would have been to proclaim himself an idiot.

THE least of all the wonders was that the secret of the place should have been kept all down the centuries; for it was the hollow middle of a limestone mountain, that could neither be looked down into from above, because the heights were not scalable, nor guessed at from the conformation of the country. The river, that flowed out of rock and went plunging down into the chasm, must be snow from the Himalayan peaks, on its way to swell the sea. There was no other way to account for that; but that explanation did explain why at least one Indian river is no greater than it is.

The road they followed was a fold in the natural rock, rising and falling and curving like a ribbon, but tending on the average downward. It looked to be about two miles to the point where it curved at the chasm's end and swept round and downward, to be lost in a fissure in the cliff.

They soon began to pass the mouths of caves. Some were above the road, now and then at crazy heights above it, reached by artificial steps hewn out of the stone. Others were below, reached from the road by means of ladders, that trembled and swayed over the dizzying waterfall. Most of the caves were inhabited, for armed men and sullen women came to their entrances to stare.

Ears grow accustomed to the sound of water sooner than to almost anything. It was not long before King's ears could catch the patter of his men's feet following, and the shod clink of the mule. He could hear when Ismail whispered:

"Be brave, little hakim! She loves fearless men."

As the track descended caves became more numerous. In one there were horses, for as they passed there came a whiff of unclean stables, and the litter of fodder and dung was all about the entrance. The mouths of other caves were sealed, with great wax disks, strangely stamped, affixed to stout wooden doors. One cave smelt as if oil were stored in it, and King wondered whence the oil was brought—for the sarkar knows to a pint and an ounce what products travel up and down the Khyber.

At last the guide halted, in the middle of a short steep slope where the

path was less than six feet wide and a narrow cave mouth gave directly on to it.

"Be content to rest here!" he said, pointing.

"Thy cave?" asked King.

"Nay. God's! I am the caretaker!"

(The "Hills" are very pious and polite, between the acts of robbing and shedding blood.)

"Allah, then, reward thee, brother!" answered King. "Allah give sight to thy blind eye! Allah give thee children! Allah give thee peace, and to all thy house!"

The guide salaamed, half-mockingly, half-wondering at such eloquence, pausing in the passage to point into the side-caves that debouched to either hand. There was a niche of a place, where a man might lie on guard near the entrance; another cave in which horses could be stabled, with plenty of fodder piled up ready; another beyond that for servants and baggage, with a fire place and cooking pots; and at the last at the rear of all a great cavern full of eerie gloom, that opened out from the end of the passage like a bottle at the end of a long neck.

Peering about him into vastness, King became aware of frame beds, placed at intervals in a row, each with a mat beside it. And there were several brass basins and ewers for water. Also there were some little bronze lamps; the guide lit three of them, and King took up one to examine it. As he did so, involuntarily his hand almost went to his bosom, where the strange knife still reposed that he had taken from the would-be murderer in the train to Delhi.

There was no gold on the lamp; but the handle by which he lifted it had been cast, the devils of the Himalayas only knew how many centuries ago, in the form of a woman dancing; her size, and her shape, and the art with which she had been fashioned, were the same as the handle of the knife.

Watching him as a wolf eyes another one, the strange guide found his tongue.

"How many such hast thou ever seen?" he asked.

"None!" answered King, and the guide cackled at him, like a hen that has laid an egg.

"There are many strange things in Khinjan, but few strangers!" he remarked; and then, as if that were enough for any man to say on any occasion, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the cavern. It was the last King ever saw of him. He followed him down the passage to the entrance and watched him until his back disappeared round the first bend, but the man never turned his head once. He did not even look over the edge of the road, down into the amazing waterfall, nor up to the round disk of sky.

KING turned back and looked into the other caves—saw the weary horse and mule fed, watered and bedded down—took note of the running water that rushed out of a rock fissure and gurgled out of sight down another one—examined the servants' cave and saw that they had been amply provided with blankets. There was nothing lacking that the most exacting traveller could have demanded at such a distance from civilization. There was more than the most exacting would have dared expect.

"Why isn't it damp in here?" he wondered, returning to his own cave. And then he noticed long fissures in the cavern walls, and that the smoke from the lamps drifted toward them.