

could only be guessed by remembering the half-mile breadth of the waterfall.

There were little lamps everywhere, perched on ledges amid the stalactites, and they suffused the whole cavern in golden glow, made the crowd's faces look golden and cast golden shimmers on the cold, black river bed. There was scarcely any smoke, for the wind that went like a storm down the tunnel seemed to have its birth here; the air was fresh and cool and never still. No doubt fresh air was pouring in continually through some shaft in the rock, but the shaft was invisible.

In the midst of the cavern a great arena had been left bare, and thousands of turbaned men squatted round it in rings. At the end where the river formed a tangent to them the rings were flattened, and at that point they were cut into by the ramp of a bridge, and by a lane left to connect the bridge with the arena. The bridge was almost the most wonderful of all.

So delicately formed that fairies might have made it with a guttered candle, it spanned the river in one splendid sweep, twenty feet above water, like a suspension bridge. Then, so light and graceful that it scarcely seemed to touch anything at all, it swept on in irregular arches downward to the arena and ceased abruptly as if shorn off by a giant ax, at a point less than half-way to it.

Its end formed a nearly square platform, about fourteen feet above the floor, and the broad track thence to the arena, as well as all the arena's boundary, had been marked off by great earthenware lamps, whose greasy smoke streaked up and was lost by the wind among the stalactites.

"Greek lamps, every one of 'em!" King whispered to himself, but wasted no time just then on trying to explain how Greek lamps had ever got there. There was too much else to watch and wonder at.

No steps led down from the bridge end to the floor; toward the arena it was blind. But from the bridge's farther end across the hurrying water stairs had been hewn out of the rock wall and led up to a hole of twice a man's height, more than fifty feet above water level.

ON either side of the bridge end a passage had been left clear to the river edge, and nobody seemed to care to invade it, although it was not marked off in any way. Each passage was about fifty feet wide and quite straight. But the space between the bridge end and the arena, and the arena itself, had to be kept free from trespassers by fifty swaggering ruffians, armed to the teeth.

Every man of the thousands there had a knife in evidence, but the arena guards had magazine rifles as well as Khyber tulwars. Nobody else wore firearms openly. Some of the arena guards bore huge round shields of prehistoric pattern of a size and sort he had never seen before, even in museums. But there was very little he was seeing that night of a kind that he had seen before anywhere!

The guards lolled insolently, conscious of brute strength and special favour. When any man trespassed with so much as a toe beyond the ring of lamps, a guard would slap his rifle butt until the swivels rattled, and the offender would scurry into bounds amid the jeers of any who had seen.

Shoving, kicking and elbowing with set purpose, Ismail forced a way through the already seated crowd and drew King down into the cramped space beside him, close enough to the arena to be able to catch the guards' low laughter. But he was restless. He wished to get nearer yet, only there seemed no room anywhere in front.

The music-box was hidden. King could see it nowhere. Five minutes after he and Ismail were seated it stopped playing. The hum of the crowd died too.

Then a guard threw his shield down with a clang and deliberately fired his rifle at the roof. The ricocheting bullet brought down a shower of splintered stone and stalactite, and he grinned as he watched the crowd dodge to avoid it.

Before they had done dodging and while he yet grinned, a chant began—ghastly—tuneless—so out of time that the words were not intelligible—yet so obvious in general meaning that nobody could hear it and not understand.

It was a devils' anthem, glorifying hellishness—suggestive of the gnashing of a million teeth, and the whicker of drawn blades—more shuddersome and mean than the wind of a winter's night. And it ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

ANOTHER ruffian fired at the roof, and while the crack of the shot yet echoed seven other of the arena guards stepped forward with long horns and blew a blast. That was greeted by a yell that made the cavern tremble.

Instantly a hundred men rose from different directions and raced for the arena, each with a curved sword in either hand. The yelling changed back into the chant, only louder than before, and by that much more terrible. Cymbals crashed. The music-box resumed its measured grinding of The Marseillaise. And the hundred began an Afridi sword dance, than which there is nothing wilder in all the world. Its like can only be seen under the shadow of the "Hills."

Ismail put his hands together and howled through them like a wolf on the war-path, nudging King with an elbow. So King imitated him, although one extra shout in all that din seemed thrown away.

The dancers pranced in a circle, each man whirling both swords around his head and the head of the man in front of him at a speed that passed belief. Their long black hair shook and swayed. The sweat began to pour from them until their arms and shoulders glistened. The speed increased. Another hundred men leaped in, forming a new ring outside the first, only facing the other way. Another hundred and fifty formed a ring outside them again, with the direction again reversed; and two hundred and fifty more formed an outer circle—all careering at the limit of their power, gasping as the beasts do in the fury of fighting to the death, slitting the air until it whistled, with swords that missed human heads by immeasurable fractions of an inch.

Ismail seemed obsessed by the spirit of hell let loose—drawn by it, as by a magnet, although subsequent events proved him not to have been altogether without a plan. He got up, with his eyes fixed on the dance, and dragged King with him to a place ten rows nearer the arena, that had been vacated by a dancer. There—two, where there was only rightly room for one—he thrust himself and King next to some Orakzai Pathans, elbowing savagely to right and left to make room. And patience proved scarce. The instant oaths of anything but greeting were like the overture to a dog fight.

"Bismillah!" swore the nearest man, deigning to use intelligible sentences at last. "Shall a dog of an Afridi hustle me?"

He reached for the ever-ready Pathan knife, and Ismail, with both eyes on the dancing, neither heard nor saw. The Pathan leaned past King to stab, but paused in the instant that

his knife licked clear. From a swift side-glance at King's face he changed to a full stare, his scowl slowly giving place to a grin as he recognized him.

"Allah!"

He drove the long blade back again, fidgeting about to make more room and kicking out at his next neighbour to the same end, so that presently King sat on the rock floor instead of on other men's hip-bones.

"Well met, hakim! See—the wound heals finely!"

Baring his shoulder under the smelly sheepskin coat, he lifted a bandage gingerly to show the clean opening out of which King had coaxed a bullet the day before. It looked wholesome and ready to heal.

"Name thy reward, hakim! We Orakzai Pathans forget no favours!" (Now that boast was a true one.)

King glanced to his left and saw that there was no risk of being overheard or interrupted by Ismail; the Afridi was beating his fists together, rocking from side to side in frenzy, and letting out about one yell a minute that would have curdled a wolf's heart.

"Nay, I have all I need!" he answered, and the Pathan laughed.

"In thine own time, hakim! Need forgets none of us!"

"True!" said King.

He nodded more to himself than to the other man. He needed, for instance, very much to know who was planning a jihad, and who "Bull-with-a beard" might be; but it was not safe to confide just yet in a chance-made acquaintance. A very fair acquaintance with some phases of the East had taught him that names such as Bull-with-a-beard are often almost photographically descriptive. He rose to his feet to look. A blind man can talk, but it takes trained eyes to gather information.

The din had increased, and it was safe to stand up and stare, because all eyes were on the madness in the middle. There were plenty besides himself who stood to get a better view,

and he had to dodge from side to side to see between them.

"I'm not to doctor his men. Therefore it's a fair guess that he and I are to be kept apart. Therefore he'll be as far away from me now as possible, supposing he's here."

Reasoning along that line, he tried to see the faces on the far side, but the problem was to see over the dancers' heads. He succeeded presently, for the Orakzai Pathan saw what he wanted, and in his anxiety to be agreeable, reached forward to pull back a box from between the ranks in front.

ITS owners offered instant fight, but made no further objection when they saw who wanted it and why. King wondered at their sudden change of mind, and the Pathan looked actually grieved that a fight should have been spared him. He tried, with a few barbed insults, to rearouse a spark of enmity, but failed, to his own great discontent.

The box was a commonplace affair, built square, of pine, and had probably contained somebody's new helmet at one stage of its career. The stencilled marks on its sides and top had long ago become obliterated by wear and dirt.

King got up on it and gazed long at the rows of spectators on the far side, and having no least notion what to look for, he studied the faces one by one.

"If he's important enough for her to have it in for him, he'll not be far from the front," he reasoned; and with that in mind he picked out several bull-necked, bearded men, any one of whom could easily have answered to the description. There were too many of them to give him any comfort, until the thought occurred to him that a man with brains enough to be a leader would not be so obsessed and excited by mere prancing athleticism as those men were. Then he looked farther along the line.

He found a man soon who was not interested in the dancing, but who

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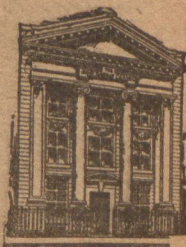
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