

THE WINDS of the WORLD

CHAPTER XII.

By TALBOT MUNDY

BLACK smoke still billowed upward from the gutted House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers, and although there were few stars visible, a watery moon looked out from between dark cloudracks and showed up the smoke above the Delhi roofs. Yasmini picked the right simile as usual. It looked as if the biggest genie ever dreamed of must be hurrying out of a fisherman's vase.

"And who is the fisherman?" she laughed, for she is fond of that sort of question that sets those near her thinking and disguises the trend of her own thoughts as utterly as if she had not any.

"The genie might be the spirit of war!" ventured a Baluchi, forgetting the one God of his Koran in a sentimental effort to please Yasmini.

She flashed a glance at him.

"Or it might be the god of the Rekis," she suggested; and everybody chuckled, because Baluchis do not relish reference to their lax religious practise any more than they like to be called "desert people." This man was a Rind Baluch of the Marri Hills, and proud of it; but pride is not always an asset at Yasmini's.

They—and the police would have dearly loved to know exactly who "they" were—stood clustered in Yasmini's great, deep window that overlooks her garden—the garden that can not be guessed at from the street. There was not one of them who could have explained how they came to assemble all on that side of the room; the movement had seemed to evolve out of the infinite calculation that everybody takes for granted, and Moslems particularly, since there seems nothing else to do about it.

It did not occur to anybody to credit Yasmini with the arrangement, or with the suddenly aroused interest in smoke against the after-midnight sky. Yet, when another man entered whose disguise was a joke to any practised eye—and all in the room were practised—it looked to the newcomer almost as if his reception had been ready staged.

He was dressed as a Mohammedan gentleman. But his feet, when he stood still, made nearly a right angle to each other, and his shoulders had none of the grace that goes with good native breeding; they were proud enough, but the pride had been drilled in and cultivated. It sat square. And if a native gentleman had walked through the streets as this man walked, all the small boys of the bazaars would have followed him to learn what nation his might be.

Yasmini seemed delighted with him. She ran toward him, curtsied to him, and called him bahadur. She made two maids bring a chair for him, and made them set it near the middle of the window whence he could see the smoke, pushing the men away on either side until he had a clear view.

But he knew enough of the native mind, at all events, to look at the smoke and not remark on it. It was so obvious that he was meant to talk about the smoke, or to ask about it, that even a German Orientalist understanding the East through German eyes had tact enough to look in silence, and, so to speak, "force trumps."

And that again, of course, was ex-

actly what Yasmini wanted. Moreover, she surprised him by not leading trumps.

"They are here," she said, with a sidewise glance at the more than thirty men who crowded near the window.

The German—and he made no pretense any longer of being anything but German—sat sidewise with both hands on his knees to get a better view of them. He scanned each face carefully, and each man entertained a feeling that he had been analyzed and ticketed and stood aside.

"I have seen all these before," he said. "They are men of the North, and good enough fighters, I have no doubt. But they are not what I asked for. How many of these are trained soldiers? Which of these could swing the allegiance of a single native regiment. It is time now for proofs and deeds. The hour of talk is gone. Bring me a soldier!"

"These also say it is all talk, sahib—words, words, words! They say they will wait until the fleet that has been spoken of comes to bombard the coast. For the present there are none to rally round."

"Yet you hinted at soldiers!" said the German. "You hinted at a regiment ready to revolt!"

"Aye, sahib! I have repeated what these say. When the soldier comes there shall be other talk! See yonder smoke, bahadur?"

NOW, then, it was time to notice things, and the German gazed over the garden and Delhi walls and roofs at what looked very much more important than it really was. It looked as if at least a street must be on fire.

"He made that holocaust, did the soldier!"

Yasmini's manner was of blended awe and admiration.

"He was suspected of disloyalty. He entered that house to make arrangements for the mutiny of a whole regiment of Sikhs, who are not willing to be sent to fight across the sea. He was followed to the house, and so, since he would not be taken, he burned all the houses. Such a man is he who comes presently. Did the sahib hear the mob roar when the flames burst out at evening? No? A pity! There were many soldiers in the mob, and many thousand discontented people!"

She went close to the window, to be between the German and the light, and let him see her silhouetted in an attitude of hope awakening. She gazed at the billowing smoke as if the hope of India were embodied in it.

"It was thus in 'fifty-seven," she said darkly. "Men began with burnings!"

Brown eyes, behind the German, exchanged glances, for the East is chary of words when it does not understand. The German nodded, for he had studied history and was sure he understood.

"Sahib hai!" said a sudden woman's voice, and Yasmini started as if taken by surprise. There were those in the room who knew that when taken by surprise she never started; but they were not German.

"He is here!" she whispered; and the German showed that he felt a crisis had arrived. He settled down

to meet it like a soldier and a man.

"Salaam!" purred Yasmini in her silveriest voice, as Ranjoor Singh strode down the middle of the room with the dignity the West may some day learn.

"See!" whispered Yasmini. "He trusts nobody. He brings his own guard with him!"

By the door at which he had entered stood a trooper of D Squadron, Outram's Own, no longer in uniform, but dressed as a Sikh servant. The man's arms were folded on his breast. The rigidity, straight stature, and attitude appealed to the German as the sight of sea did to the ancient Greeks.

"Salaam!" said Ranjoor Singh.

The German noticed that his eyes glowed, but the rest of him was all calm dignity.

"We have met before," said the German, rising. "You are the Sikh with whom I spoke the other night—the Sikh officer—the squadron leader!"

"Ja!" said Ranjoor Singh; and the one word startled the German so that he caught his breath.

"Sie sprechen Deutsch?"

"Ja wohl!"

The German muttered something half under his breath that may have been meant for a compliment to Ranjoor Singh, but the risaldar-major missed it, for he had stepped up to the nearest of the Northern gentlemen and confronted him. There was a great show of looking in each other's eyes and muttering under the breath some word and counter-word. Each made a sign with his right hand, then with his left, that the German could not see, and then Ranjoor Singh stepped sidewise to the next man.

Man by man, slowly and with care, he looked each man present in the eyes and tested him for the password, while Yasmini watched admiringly.

"Any who do not know the word will die to-night!" she whispered; and the German nodded, because it was evident that the Northerners were quite afraid. He approved of that kind of discipline.

"These are all true men—patriots," said Ranjoor Singh, walking back to him. "Now say what you have to say."

"Jetzt—" began the German.

"Speak Hindustani that they all may understand," said Ranjoor Singh; and the others gathered closer.

"My friend, I am told—"

But Yasmini broke in, bursting between Ranjoor Singh and the German.

"Nay, let the sahibs go alone into the other room. Neither will speak his mind freely before company—is it not so? Into the other room, sahibs, while we wait here!"

RANJOOR SINGH bowed, and the German clicked his heels together. Ranjoor Singh made a sign, but the German yielded precedence; so Ranjoor Singh strode ahead, and the German followed him, wishing to high Heaven he could learn to walk with such consummate grace. As they disappeared through the jingling bead-curtain, the Sikh trooper followed them, and took his stand again with folded arms by the door-post. The German saw him, and smiled; he approved of that.

Then Yasmini gathered her thirty curious Northerners together around her and proceeded to entertain them

while the plot grew nearer to its climax in another room. She led them back to the divans by the inner wall. She set them to smoking while she sang a song to them. She parried their questions with dark hints and innuendoes that left them more mystified than ever; yet no man would admit he could not understand.

And then she danced to them. She danced for an hour, to the wild minor music that her women made, and she seemed to gather strength and lightness as the night wore on. Near dawn the German and Ranjoor Singh came out together, to find her yet dancing, and she ceased only to pull the German aside and speak to him.

"Does he really speak German?" she whispered.

"He? He has read Nietzsche and von Bernhardt in the German!"

"Who are they?"

"They are difficult to read—philosophers."

"Has he satisfied you?"

"He has promised that he will."

"Then go before I send the rest away!"

So the German tried to look like a Mohammedan again, and went below to a waiting landau. Before he was half-way down the stairs Yasmini's hands gripped tight on Ranjoor Singh's forearms and she had him backed into a corner.

"Ranjoor Singh, thou art no buffalo! I was wrong! Thou art a great man, Ranjoor Singh!"

She received no answer.

"What hast thou promised him?"

"To show him a mutinous regiment of Sikhs."

"And what has he promised?"

"To show me what we seek."

She nodded.

"Good!" she said.

"So now I promise thee something," said Ranjoor Singh sternly. "To-morrow—to-day—I shall eat black shame on thy account, for this is thy doing. Later I will go to France. Later again, I will come back and—"

"And love me as they all do!" laughed Yasmini, pushing him away.

CHAPTER XIII.

BYOND question Yasmini is a craftsman of amazing skill, and her genius—as does all true genius—extends to the almost infinite consideration of small details. The medium in which she works—human weakness—affords her unlimited opportunity—and she owns the trick, that most great artists win, of not letting her general plan be known before the climax. Neither friend nor enemy is ever quite sure which is which until she solves the problem to the enemy's confusion.

But Yasmini could have failed in this case through overmuch finesse. She was not used to Germans, and could not realize until too late that her compliance with this man's every demand only served to make him more peremptory and more one-sided in his point of view. From a mere agent, offering the almost unimaginable in return for mere promises, he had grown already into a dictator, demanding action as a prelude to reward. He had even threatened to cause her, Yasmini, to be reported to the police unless she served his purpose better!

If she had obeyed the general and had picked a trooper for the business in hand, it is likely that Yasmini would have had to write a failure to her account. She had come perilously near