

KING, OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

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CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

KING asked the same question of the Orakzai Pathan; but the Pathan would have none of his questions, he was busy listening for whispers from the crowd, watching with both eyes, and he shoved King aside.

The crowd was very far from being satisfied. An angry murmur had begun to fill the cavern as a hive is filled with the song of bees at swarming time. But even so, surmise what one might, it was not easy to persuade the eye that Yasmini's careless smile and easy poise were assumed. If she recognized indignation and feared it, she disguised her fear amazingly.

King saw her whisper to a guard. The fellow nodded and passed his shield to another man. He began to make his way in no great hurry toward the edge of the arena. She whispered again and standing forward with their trumpets seven of the guards blew a blast that split across the cavern like the trump of doom; and as its hundred thousand echoes died in the roof, the hum of voices died, too, and the very sound of breathing. The gurgling of water became as if the river flowed in solitude.

Leisurely then, languidly, she raised both arms until she looked like an angel poised for flight. The little jewels stitched to her gauzy dress twinkled like fire-flies as she moved. The crowd gasped sharply. She had it by the heartstrings.

She called, and four guards got under one shield, bowing their heads and resting the great rim on their shoulders. They carried it beneath her and stood still. With a low delicious laugh, sweet and true, she sprang on it, and the shield scarcely trembled; she seemed lighter than the silk her dress was woven from!

They carried her so, looking as if she and the shield were carved of a piece, and by a master such as has not often been. And in the midst of the arena before they had ceased moving she began to sing, with her head thrown back and bosom swelling like a bird's.

The East would ever rather draw its own conclusions from a hint let fall than be puzzled by what the West believes are facts. And parables are not good evidence in courts of law, which is always a consideration. So her song took the form of a parable.

And to say that she took hold of them and played rhapsodies of her own making on their heart-strings would be to undervalue what she did. They were dumb while she sang, but they rose at her. Not a force in the world could have kept them down, for she was deftly touching cords that stirred other forces—subtle, mysterious, mesmeric, which the old East understands—which Muhammad the Prophet understood when he harnessed evil in the shafts with men and wrote rules for their driving in a book. They rose in silence and stood tense.

While she sang, the guard to whom she had whispered forced a way through the ranks of the standing crowd, and came behind Ismail. He tweaked the Afridi's ear to draw attention, for like all the others—like King, too—Ismail was listening with dropped jaw and watching with burning eyes. For a minute they whispered, so low that King did not hear

what they said; and then the guard forced his way back by the shortest route to the arena, knocking down half a dozen men and gaining safety beyond the lamps before his victims could draw knife and follow him.

Yasmini's song went on, verse after verse, telling never one fact, yet hinting unutterable things in a language that was made for hint and metaphor and parable and innuendo. What tongue did not hint at was conveyed by subtle gesture and a smile and flashing eyes. It was perfectly evident that she knew more than King—more than the general at Peshawur—more than the viceroy at Simla—probably more than the British government—concerning what was about to happen in Islam. The others might guess. She knew. It was just as evident that she would not tell. The whole of her song, and it took her twenty minutes by the count of King's pulse, to sing it, was a warning to wait and a promise of amazing things to come.

SHE sang of a wolf-pack gathering from the valleys in the snow—a very hungry wolf-pack. Then of a stalled ox, grown fat from being cared for. Of the "Heart of the Hills" that awoke in the womb of the Hills, and that listened and watched.

"Now, is she the Heart of the Hills?" King wondered. The rumours men had heard and told again in India, about the "Heart of the Hills" in Khinjan seemed to have foundation.

He thought of the strange knife, wrapped in a handkerchief under his shirt, with its bronze blade and gold hilt in the shape of a woman dancing. The woman dancing was astonishingly like Yasmini, standing on the shield!

She sang about the owners of the stalled ox, who were busy at bay, defending themselves and their ox from another wolf-pack in another direction "far beyond."

She urged them to wait a little while. The ox was big enough and fat enough to nourish all the wolves in the world for many seasons. Let them wait, then, until another, greater wolf-pack joined them, that they might go hunting all together, overwhelm its present owners and devour the ox! So urged the "Heart of the Hills," speaking to the mountain wolves, according to Yasmini's song.

"The little cubs in the burrows know. Are ye grown wolves, who hurry so?"

She paused, for effect; but they gave tongue then because they could not help it, and the cavern shook to their terrific worship.

"Allah! Allah!"

They summoned God to come and see the height and depth and weight of their allegiance to her! And because for their thunder there was no more chance of being heard, she dropped from the shield like a blossom. No sound of falling could have been heard in all that din, but one could see she made no sound. The shield-bearers ran back to the bridge and stood below it, eyes agape.

Rewa Gunga spoke truth in Delhi when he assured King he should some day wonder at Yasmini's dancing.

She became joy and bravery and youth! She danced a story for them of the things they knew. She was the dawn light, touching the distant peaks. She was the wind that follows it, sweeping among the junipers and

kissing each as she came. She was laughter, as the little children laugh when the cattle are loosed from the byres at last to feed in the valleys. She was the scent of spring uprising. She was blossom. She was fruit! Very daughter of the sparkle of warm sun on snow, she was the "Heart of the Hills" herself!

Never was such dancing! Never such an audience! Never such mad applause! She danced until the great rough guards had to run round the arena with clubbed butts and beat back trespassers who would have mobbed her. And every movement—every gracious wonder-curve and step with which she told her tale was as purely Greek as the handle on King's knife and the figures on the lamp-bowls and as the bracelets on her arm. Greek!

And she half-modern-Russian, ex-girl-wife of a semi-civilized Hill-rajah! Who taught her? There is nothing new, even in Khinjan, in the "Hills"!

And when the crowd defeated the arena guards at last and burst through the swinging butts to seize her and fling her high and worship her with mad barbaric rite, she ran toward the shield. The four men raised it shoulder-high again. She went to it like a leaf in the wind—sprang on it as if wings had lifted her, scarce touching it with naked toes—and leapt to the bridge with a laugh.

She went over the bridge on tiptoes, like nothing else under heaven but Yasmini at her bewitchingest. And without pausing on the far side she danced up the hewn stone stairs, dived into the dark hole and was gone!

"Come!" yelled Ismail in King's ear. He could have heard nothing less, for the cavern was like to burst apart from the tumult.

"Whither?" the Afridi shouted in disgust. "Does the wind ask whither? Come like the wind and see! They will remember next that they have a bone to pick with thee! Come away!"

That seemed good enough advice. He followed as fast as Ismail could shoulder a way out between the frantic Hillmen, deafened, stupefied, numbed, almost cowed by the ovation they were giving the "Heart of their Hills."

CHAPTER XII.

AS they disappeared after a scramble through the mouth of the tunnel they had entered by, a roar went up behind them like the birth of earthquakes. Looking back over his shoulder King saw Yasmini come back into the hole's mouth, to stand framed in it and bow acknowledgment. She looked so ravishing in contrast to the huge grim wall, and the black river, and the darkness at her back, that Khinjan's thousands tried to storm the bridge and drag her down to them. The guards were hard put to it, with their backs to the bridge end, for two or three minutes.

But Ismail would not let him wait and watch from there. He dragged him down the tunnel and pushed him up on to a ledge where they could both see without being seen, through a fissure in the rock.

For the space of five minutes Yasmini stood in the great hole, smiling and watching the struggle below. Then she went, and the guards began to get the best of it, because the crowd's enthusiasm waned when they could see her no more. Then suddenly the guards began to loose random volleys at the roof and brought down

hundredweights of splintered stalactite.

Within a minute there were a hundred men busy sweeping up the splinters. In another minute twenty Zakka Khels had begun a sword dance, yelling like the damned. A hundred joined them. In three minutes more the whole arena was a dinning whirlpool, and the river's voice was drowned in shouting and the stamping of naked feet on stone.

"Come!" urged Ismail, and led the way.

King's last impression was of earth's womb on fire and of hellions brewing wrath. The stalactites and the hurrying river multiplied the dancing lights into a million, and the great roof hurled the din down again to make confusion with the new din coming up.

ISMAIL went like a rat down a run, and King failed to overtake him until he found him in the cave of the slippers kicking to right and left at random.

"Choose a good pair!" he growled. "Let late-comers fight for what is left! Nay, I have thine! Choose thou the next best!"

The statement being one of fact, and that no time or place for a quarrel with the only friend in sight, King picked out the best slippers he could see. The instant he had them on Ismail was off again, running like the wind.

They had no torch. They left the little tunnel lamps behind. It became so dark that King had to follow by ear, and so it happened that he missed seeing where the tunnel forked. He imagined they were running back toward the ledge under the waterfall; yet, when Ismail called a halt at last, panting, groped behind a great rock for a lamp and lit the wick with a common safety match, they were in a cave he had never seen before.

"Where are we?" King asked.

"Where none dare seek us."

Ismail held the lamp high, shielding its wick with a hollowed palm and peering about him as if in doubt, his ragged beard looking like smoke in the wind; for a wind blew down all the passages in Khinjan.

King examined the lamp. It was bronze and almost as surely ancient Greek as it surely was not Indian. There were figures graven on the bowl representing a woman dancing, who looked not unlike Yasmini; but before he had time to look very closely Ismail blew the lamp out and was off again, like a shadow shot into its mother night.

Confused by the sudden darkness King crashed into a rock as he tried to follow. Ismail turned back and gave him the end of a cotton girdle that he unwound from his waist, then he plunged ahead again into Cimmerian blackness, down a passage so narrow that they could touch a wall with either hand.

Once he shouted back to duck, and they passed under a low roof where water dripped on them, and the rock underfoot was the bed of a shallow stream. After that the track began to rise, and the grade grew so steep that even Ismail, the furious, had to slacken pace.

They began to climb up titanic stairways all in the dark, feeling their way through fissures in a mountain's framework, up zigzag ledges, and over great broken lumps of rock from one cave to another; until at last in one great cave Ismail stopped and relit the lamp. Hunting about with its aid he found an imported "hurricane" lantern and lit that, leaving the bronze lamp in its place.

Soon after that they lost sight of walls to their left for a time, although there were no stars, nor any light to