

King, of the Khyber Rifles

(Continued from page 24.)

fire and smoke wandered up, until they flattened on a moving opal dome, that prisoned all the noises in the world.

"Earth's Drink!" he announced, waving the torch and then shutting his mouth tight, as if afraid to voice sacrilege.

It was the river, million-coloured in the torch-light, pouring from a half-mile-long slash in the cliff above them and plunging past them through the gloom toward the very middle of the world. Its width was a matter of memory, and its depth unguessable, for although dim moonlight filtered through it, he did not know where the moon was, nor how far such light could penetrate through moving water. Somewhere it met rock-bottom and boiled there, for a roar like the sea's came up from deeps unimaginable.

He watched the overturning dome

it. After ten minutes' hurrying uphill he guessed they must be level with the river, in a tunnel running nearly parallel.

He proved to be right, for they came to a gap in the wall, and Ismail thrust the torch through it. The light shone on swift black water, and a wind rushed through the gap that nearly blew the torch out. It accounted altogether for the dryness of the rock and the fresh air in the tunnel. The river's weight seemed to suck a hurricane along with it—air enough for a million men to breathe.

After that there was no more need to stop at intervals and beat the torch against the wall to make it burn brightly, for the wind fanned it until the flame was nearly white. Ismail kept looking back to bid King hurry and never paused once to rest.

"Come!" he urged fiercely. "This

ancient Greece.

It was like a transposition of epochs. King felt already as if the twentieth century had never existed, just as he seemed to have left life behind for good and all when the mosque door had closed on him.

A quarter of a mile farther along the tunnel opened into another, yet greater cave, and there every man kicked off his slippers, without seeming to trouble how they lay; they littered the floor unarranged and uncared for, looking like the cast-off wing-cases of gigantic beetles.

After that cave there were two sharp turns in the tunnel, and then at last a sea of noise and a veritable blaze of light.

Part of the noise made King feel homesick, for out of the mountain's very womb brayed a music-box, such as the old-time carousals made use of before the days of electricity and steam. It was being worked by inexperienced hands, for the time was something jerky; but it was robbed of its

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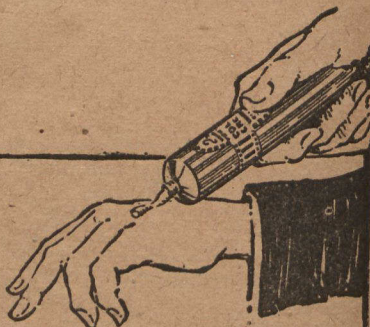
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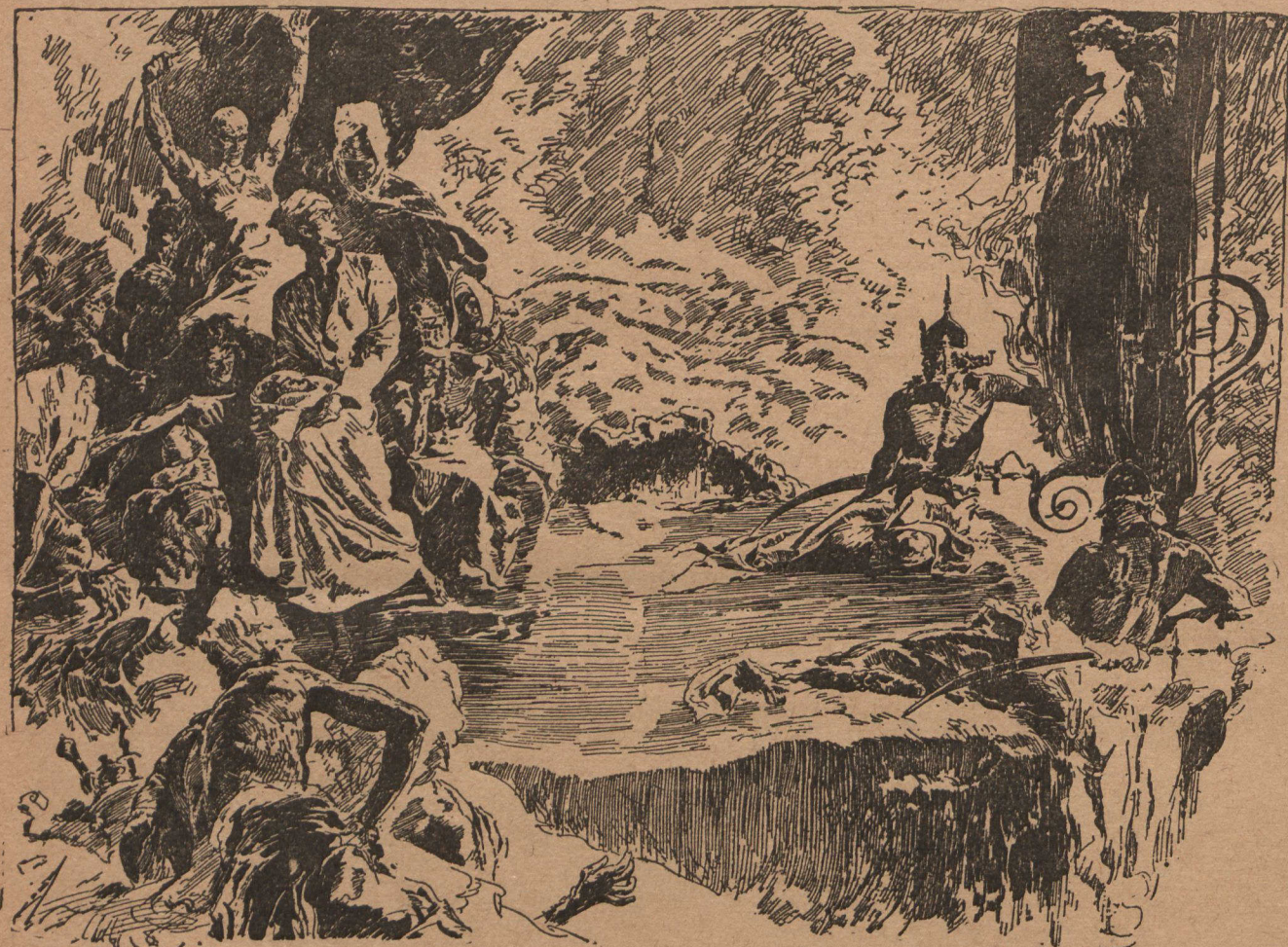
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The crowd was growing impatient. "Throw it! Throw it!"

until his senses reeled. Then he crawled on hands and knees to the ledge's brink and tried to peer over. But Ismail dragged him back.

"Come!" he howled; but in all that din his shout was like a whisper.

"How deep is it?" King bellowed back.

"Allah! Ask Him who made it!"

THE fear of the falls was on the Afridi, and he tugged at King's arm in a frenzy of impatience. Suddenly he let go and broke into a run. King trotted after him, afraid, too, to look to right or left, lest the fear should make him throw himself over the brink. The thunder and the hugeness had their grip on him and had begun to numb his power to think and his will to be a man. Suddenly when they had run a hundred yards, Ismail turned sharp to the right into a tunnel that led straight back into the cliff and sloped uphill. As the din of the falls grew less behind him and his power to think returned, King calculated that they must be following the main direction of the river bed, but edging away gradually to the right of

leads to the 'Heart of the Hill!' And after that King had to do his best to keep the Afridi's back in sight.

They began after a time to hear voices and to see the smoky glare made by other torches. Then Ismail set the pace yet faster, and they became the last two of a procession of turbaned men, who tramped along a winding tunnel into a great mountain's womb. The sound of slippers clicking and rutching on the rock floor swelled and died and swelled again as the tunnel led from cavern into cavern.

In one great cave they came to every man beat out his torch and tossed it on a heap. The heap was more than shoulder high, and three parts covered the floor of the cave. After that there was a ledge above the height of a man's head on either side of the tunnel, and along the ledge little oil-burning lamps were spaced at measured intervals. They looked ancient enough to have been there when the mountain itself was born, and although all the brass ones suggested Indian and Hindu origin, there were others among them of earthenware that looked like plunder from

tinny meanness and even lent majesty by the hugeness of a cavern's roof, as well as by the crashing, swinging march it played—wild—wonderful—invented for lawless hours and a kingless people.

"Marchons!—Citoyens!—"

The procession began to tramp in time to it, and the rock shook. They deployed to left and right into a space so vast that the eye at first refused to try to measure it. It was the hollow core of a mountain, filled by the sea-sound of a human crowd and hung with huge stalactites that danced and shifted and flung back a thousand colours at the flickering light below.

THERE was an undertone to the clangor of the music-box and the human hum, for across the cavern's farther end for a space of two hundred yards the great river rushed, penned here into a deep trough of less than a tenth its normal width—plunging out of a great fanged gap and hurrying out of view down another one, licking smooth banks on its way with a hungry sucking sound. Its depth where it crossed the cavern's end