

THE WINDS of the WORLD

CHAPTER XI.

By TALBOT MUNDY

MEN say Yasmini does not sleep. Of course, that is absurd. None the less, it is certain she must do much of her plotting in the daytime, for by night, until after midnight, she is always the Yasmini whom the Northern gentry know, at home to all comers in her wonderful apartment.

It is ever a mystery to them how she knows all that is going on in Delhi, and in India, and in the greater outer world, although they themselves bring her information that no government could ever suck out of the silent hills. They know where she keeps her cobras—where the strong-box is, in which her jewels lie crowded—who run her errands—and some of her past history, for not even a mongoose is more inquisitive than a man born in the hills, and Yasmini has many maids. But none—not even her favorite, most confidential maids—know what is in the little room that she reaches down a private flight of stairs that have a steel door at the top.

She keeps the key to that steel door, and it has, besides, a combination lock that only she understands.

Once a very clever hillman, who had been south for an education and had learned skepticism in addition to the rule of three, undertook to discover wires leading over roof-tops to that room; but he searched for a week and did not find them. When his search was over, and all had done laughing at him, he was found one night with a knife-wound between his shoulder-blades, and, later still, Yasmini sang a song about him. None searched for wires after that, and the consensus of opinion still is that she makes magic in the room below-stairs.

She sought that room the minute Ranjoor Singh was safely locked in with his trooper, although her maids reported more than one Northern gentleman waiting impatiently in the larger of her two reception-rooms for official information of the war. Government bulletins are regarded as pure fiction always, unless confirmed by Yasmini.

And, within five minutes of Ranjoor Singh's release of his trooper from the sheet, no less a personage than a general officer had thrown aside other business and had drawn on a cloak of secrecy that not even his own secretary could penetrate.

"Closed carriage!" he ordered; and, as though the fire brigade were doing double duty, a carriage came, and the horses, rump-down, halted from the gallop outside his door.

"Pathan turban!" he ordered; and his servant brought him one.

"Sheepskin cloak!"

In a moment the upper half of him would have passed in the dark for that of a rather portly Northern trader. He decided that a rug would do the rest, and snatched one as he ran for the carriage with the turban under his arm. He gave no order to the driver other than "Cheloh!" and that means "Go ahead"; so the driver, who was a Sikh, went ahead as the guns go into action, asway and aswing, regardless of everything but speed.

"Yasmini's!" said the general, at the end of a hundred yards; and the Sikh took a square, right-angle turn at full gallop with a neatness the

Horse Artillery could not have bettered. There seemed to be no need of further instructions, for the Sikh pulled up unbidden at the private door that is to all appearance only a mark on the dirty-looking wall.

With a rug around his middle, there shot out then what a watching small boy described afterward as "a fat hill-rajah on his way to be fleeced." The carriage drove on, for coachmen who wait outside Yasmini's door are likely to be butts for questions. The door opened without any audible signal, and the man with the rug around his middle disappeared.

He had ceased to bear any resemblance to any one but a stout English general in mess-dress by the time he reached the dark stair-head; and Yasmini took the precaution of being there alone to meet him. She held a candle-lantern.

"Whom have you?" he demanded.

THEY seemed to understand each other—these two. He paid her no compliments, and she expected none; she made no attempt at all to flatter him or deceive him. But, being Yasmini, it did not lie in her to answer straightly.

"I set a trap and a buffalo blundered into it! He will do better than any other!"

"Whom have you?"

"Risaldar-Major Ranjoor Singh!"

The general whistled softly.

"Of the Sikh Light Cavalry?" he asked.

"One of Kirby sahib's officers, and a trooper into the bargain!"

The general whistled again.

"There were two troopers whom I meant to catch," she said hurriedly, for it was evident that the general did not at all approve of the turn affairs had taken. "I had a trap for them at the House-of-the-Eight-Half-Brothers, and some hillmen in there ready to rush out and seize them as they passed. But a fool Afridi murdered one, and I only got there in the nick of time to save the other's life. I meant that Ranjoor Singh, who is a buffalo, should be troubled about his troopers and suspected on his own account, for he and I have a private quarrel. I did not mean to catch him, or make use of him. But he walked into the trap. What shall be done with him? Let the sahib say the word and—"

Her gesture was inimitable. Not so the gurgle that she gave, for a man's breath bubbling through the blood of a slit throat makes the same shudder-some sound exactly. The general took no notice whatever of that, for wise men of the West understand the East's attempts to scandalize them. It is the everlasting amusement of Yasmini, and a thousand others, to pretend that the English are even more blood careless than themselves, just as it is their practise to build confidently on the opposite fact.

"Did you fire the House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers?" asked the general suddenly.

"Am I a sweeper?" she retorted.

"Did you order it done?"

"Did Junna rise when the rain came? There were six good cobras of mine burned alive, to say nothing of the bones of a dead Afridi! Nay,

sahib, I ordered a clear trail left from there to here, connecting me and thee and Ranjoor Singh to the Germans and a dog of an Afridi murderer. I left a trail that even the police could follow!"

"Whose property is that house?"

"Whose? Ask the lawyers! They have fought about it in the courts until lawyers own every stick and stone of it, and now the lawyers fight one another! The government will spend a year now," she laughed, "seeking whom to fine for the fire. It will be good to see the lawyers run to cover!"

"This is a bad business!" said the general sternly; and he used two words in the native tongue that are thirty times more expressive of badness as applied to machinations than are the English for them. "The plan was to kidnap a trooper, or two troopers—to tempt him, or them—and, should they prove incorruptible, to give them certain work to do. And what have you done?"

Yasmini laughed at him—merry, mocking laughter that stung him because it was so surely genuine. She did not need to tell him in words that she was not afraid of him; she could laugh in his face and make the truth sink deeper.

"And now what will the burra sahib do?" she mocked. "There is war—a great war—a war of all the world—but Yasmini fired a rat-run and avenged a murdered sikh. First let us punish Yasmini! Shall I send for police to arrest me, burra sahib? Or shall I send a maid in search of babu Sita Ram that the game may continue?"

"What do you want, Sita Ram for?"

SITA RAM is nearly always useful, sahib. He is on a message now. He is a fool who likes to meddle where he thinks none notice him. Such are the sort who cost least and work the longest hours. Who, for instance, sahib, is to balk Kirby sahib when he grows suspicious and begins to search in earnest for his Ranjoor Singh? He knew that Ranjoor Singh was at the House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers; there was a man on watch outside. He will come here next, for Ranjoor Singh has been reported to him as having talked with Germans in my house."

"Reported by whom?"

"By the Afridi who is now dead."

"Who killed the Afridi?"

"Does the burra sahib think I killed him?"

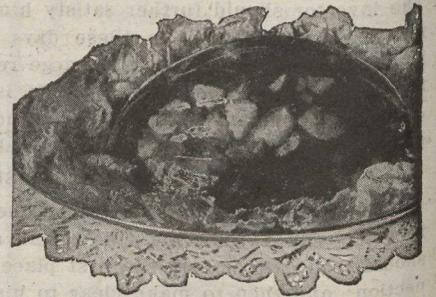
"I asked a question!" snapped the general.

"In the first place, then, Ranjoor Singh, the buffalo, struck the Afridi with his foot. The Afridi, who was a dog with yellow teeth, went outside to sing sweet compliments to Ranjoor Singh. Certain Sikhs heard him—of whom one was the trooper who waits in another room with Ranjoor Singh—and they beat him nearly to death because, being buffaloes themselves, they love Ranjoor Singh, who is the greatest buffalo of all.

"For revenge, the Afridi told tales of Ranjoor Singh, and later knifed one Sikh trooper who had beaten him. The other trooper followed him into the House-of-the-Eight-Half-brothers, where he soon had opportunity for vengeance. Now the burra sahib knows all. Is it not a sweet love-

(Continued on page 24.)

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