

KING—OF THE KHYBER RIFLES

A New Serial Story

A Tale of Daring and Deep Intrigue in India During the Great War---and how a Captain Defeated the Famed Yasmini, in the Very Shadow of the Himalayas

By TALBOT MUNDY

THE men who govern India—more power to them and her!—are few. Those who stand in their way and pretend to help them with a flood of words are a host. And from the host goes up an endless cry that India is the home of thugs, and of three hundred million hungry ones.

The men who know—and Athelstan King might claim to know a little—answer that she is the original home of chivalry and the modern mistress of as many decent, gallant, native gentlemen as ever graced a page of history.

The charge has seen the light in print that India—well-spring of plague and sudden death and money-lenders—has sold her soul to twenty succeeding conquerors in turn.

Athelstan King and a hundred like him whom India has picked from British stock and taught, can answer truly that she has won it back again from each by very purity of purpose.

So when the world war broke the world was destined to be surprised on India's account. The Red Sea, full of racing transports crowded with dark-skinned gentlemen, whose one prayer was that the war might not be over before they should have struck a blow for Britain, was the Indian army's answer to the press.

The rest of India paid its taxes and contributed and muzzled itself and set to work to make supplies. For they understand in India, almost as nowhere else, the meaning of such old-fashioned words as gratitude and honour; and of such platitudes as, "Give, and it shall be given unto you."

More than one nation was deeply shocked by India's answer to "practices" that had extended over years. But there were men in India who learned to love India long ago with that love that casts out fear, who knew exactly what was going to happen and could therefore afford to wait for orders instead of running round in rings.

Athelstan King, for instance, nothing yet but a captain unattached, sat in meagerly furnished quarters with his heels on a table. He is not a doctor, yet he read a book on surgery; and when he went over to the club he carried the book under his arm and continued to read it there. He is considered a rotten conversationalist, and he did nothing at the club to improve his reputation.

"Man alive—get a move on!" gasped a wondering senior, accepting a cigar. Nobody knows where he gets those long, strong, black cheroots, and nobody ever refuses one.

"Thanks—got a book to read," said King.

"You ass! Wake up and grab the best thing in sight, as a stepping stone to something better! Wake up and worry!"

King grinned. You have to when you don't agree with a senior officer, for the army is like a school in many more ways than one.

"Help yourself, sir! I'll take the job that's left when the scramble's over. Something good's sure to be overlooked."

"White feather? Laziness? Dark Horse?" the major wondered. Then he hurried away to write telegrams, because a belief thrives in the early days of any war that influence can make or break a man's chances. In the other room where the telegraph blanks were littered in confusion all about the floor, he ran into a crony whose chief sore point was Athelstan King, loathing him as some men loathe pickles or sardines, for no real reason whatever, except that they are what they are.

"Saw you talking to King," he said.

"Yes. Can't make him out. Rum fellow!"

"Rum? Huh! Trouble is he's seventh of his family in succession to serve in India. She has seeped into him and pickled his heritage. He's a believer in Kismet crossed on to Opportunity. Not sure he doesn't pray to Allah on the sly! Hopeless case."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite!"

SO they all sent telegrams and forgot King, who sat and smoked and read about surgery; and before he had nearly finished one box of cheroots a general at Peshawur wiped a bald red skull and sent him an urgent telegram.

"Come at once!" it said simply.

King was at Lahore, but miles don't matter when the dogs of war are loosed. The right man goes to the right place at the exact right time then, and the fool goes to the wall. In that one respect war

is better than some kinds of peace.

In the train on the way to Peshawur he did not talk any more volubly, and a fellow traveler, studying him from the opposite corner of the stifling compartment, catalogued him as "quite an ordinary man." But he was of the Public Works Department, which is sorrowfully underpaid and wears emotions on its sleeve for policy's sake, believing of course that all the rest of the world should do the same.

"Don't you think we're bound in honour to go to Belgium's aid?" he asked. "Can you see any way out of it?"

"Haven't looked for one," said King.

"But don't you think—"

"No," said King. "I hardly ever think. I'm in the army, don't you know, and don't have to. What's the use of doing somebody else's work?"

"Rotter!" thought the P. W. D. man, almost aloud; but King was not troubled by any further forced conversation. Consequently he reached Peshawur comfortable, in spite of the heat. And his genial manner of saluting the full-general who met him with a dog-cart at Peshawur station was something scandalous.

"Is he a lunatic or a relative of royalty?" the P. W. D. man wondered.

Full-generals, particularly in the early days of war, do not drive to the station to meet captains very often; yet King climbed into the dog-cart unexcitedly, after keeping the general waiting while he checked a trunk!

THE general cracked his whip without any other comment than a smile. A blood mare tore sparks out of the macadam, and a dusty military road began to ribbon out between the wheels. Sentries in unexpected places announced themselves with a ring of shaken steel as their rifles came to the "present," which courtesies the general noticed with a raised whip. Then a fox-terrier resumed his chase of squirrels between the planted shade-trees, and Peshawur became normal, shimmering in light and heat reflected from the "Hills."

(The P. W. D. man, who would have giggled if a general mentioned him by name, walked because no conveyance could be hired. Judgment was in the wind.)

On the dog-cart's high front seat, staring straight ahead of him between the horse's ears, King listened. The general did nearly all the talking.

"The North's the danger."

King grunted with the lids half-lowered over full dark eyes. He did not look especially handsome in that attitude. Some men swear he looks like a Roman, an others liken him to a gargoyle, all of them choosing to ignore the smile that can transform his whole face instantly.

"We're denuding India of troops—not keeping back more than a mere handful to hold the tribes in check."

King nodded. There has never been peace along the northwest border. It did not need vision to fore see trouble from that quarter. In fact it must have been partly on the strength of some of King's reports that the general was planning now.

"That was a very small handful of Sikhs you named as likely to give trouble. Did you do that job thoroughly?"

King grunted.

"Well—Delhi's chock-full of spies, all listening to stories made in Germany for them to take back to the 'Hills' with 'em. The tribes'll know presently how many men we're sending overseas. There've been rumours about Khinjan by the hundred lately. They're cooking something. Can you imagine 'em keeping quiet now?"

"That depends, sir. Yes, I can imagine it."

The general laughed. "That's why I sent for you. I need a man with imagination! There's a woman

you've got to work with on this occasion who can imagine a shade or two too much. What's worse, she's ambitious. So I chose you to work with her."

KING'S lips stiffened under the moustache, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled into crow's-feet to correspond. Eyes are never coal-black, of course, but his looked it at that minute.

"You know we've sent men to Khinjan who are said to have entered the Caves. Not one of 'em has ever returned."

King frowned.

"She claims she can enter the Caves and come out again at pleasure. She has offered to do it, and I have accepted."

It would not have been polite to look incredulous, so King's expression changed to one of intense interest a little overdone, as the general did not fail to notice.

"If she hadn't given proof of devotion and ability, I'd have turned her down. But she has. Only the other day she uncovered a plot in Delhi—about a million dynamite bombs in a ruined temple in charge of a German agent for use by mutineers supposed to be ready to rise against us. Fact! Can you guess who she is?"

"Not Yasmini?" King hazarded, and the general nodded and flicked his whip. The horse mistook it for a signal, and it was two minutes before the speed was reduced to mere recklessness.

The helmet-strap mark, printed indelibly on King's jaw and cheek by the Indian sun, tightened and grew whiter—as the general noted out of the corner of his eye.

"Know her?"

"Know of her, of course, sir. Everybody does. Never met her to my knowledge."

"Um-m-m! Whose fault was that? Somebody ought to have seen to that. Go to Delhi now and meet her. I'll send her a wire to say you're coming. She knows I've chosen you. She tried to insist on full discretion, but I over-ruled her. Between us two, she'll have discretion once she gets beyond Jamrud. The 'Hills' are full of our spies, of course, but none of 'em dare try Khinjan Caves any more and you'll be the only check we shall have on her."

King's tongue licked his lips, and his eyes wrinkled. The general's voice became the least shade more authoritative.

"When you see her, get a pass from her that'll take you into Khinjan Caves! Ask her for it! For the sake of appearances I'll gazette you Seconded to the Khyber Rifles. For the sake of success, get a pass from her!"

"Very well, sir."

"You've a brother in the Khyber Rifles, haven't you? Was it you or your brother who visited Khinjan once and sent in a report?"

"I did, sir."

He spoke without pride. Even the brigade of British-Indian cavalry that went to Khinjan on the strength of his report and leveled its defences with the ground, had not been able to find the famous Caves. Yet the Caves themselves are a by-word.

"There's talk of a jihad (holy war). There's worse than that! When you went to Khinjan, what was your chief object?"

"To find the source of the everlasting rumours about the so-called 'Heart of the Hills,' sir."

"Yes, yes. I remember. I read your report. You didn't find anything, did you? Well. The story is now that the 'Heart of the Hills' has come to life. So the spies say."

King whistled softly.

"THERE'S no guessing what it means," said the general. "Go and find out. Go and work with Yasmini. I shall have enough men here to attack instantly and smash any small force as soon as it begins to gather anywhere near the border. But Khinjan is another story. We can't prove anything, but the spies keep bringing in rumours of ten thousand men in Khinjan Caves, and of another large lashkar not far away from Khinjan. There must be no jihad, King! India is all but defenceless! We can tackle sporadic raids. We can even handle an ordinary raid in force. But this story about a 'Heart of the Hills' coming to life may presage unfly of action and a holy war such as the world has not seen. Go up there and stop it if you can. At least, let me know the facts."

King grunted. To stop a holy war single-handed